

# **Matriliny in Meghalaya**

---

**Tradition and  
Change**

**Editor  
Pariyaram M. Chacko**

954164  
N98-CL  
669

# MATRILINY IN MEGHALAYA

Tradition and Change



Editor  
*Pariyaram M. Chacko*



*Regency Publications*  
New Delhi



Call No. 303-40954164  
Acc. No. 7669

Division of  
**DAYA PUBLISHING HOUSE**  
4760-61/23, Ansari Road,  
Darya Ganj, New Delhi - 110 002  
Phone: 23245578, 23244987; Fax: (011) 23260116  
E-mail: info@regency-books.com  
Website: www.regencybooks.com

© 1998, The Editor

ISBN 81-86030-69-7

Published by Regency Publications, 20/36-G, Old Market, West Patel Nagar, New Delhi 110 008, India and printed at Radiant Printers, New Delhi 110 008, Phones: 571 2539; 574 0038; Telefax: 578 3571.

## Foreword

---

India is veritably a unity in diversity. It is an amazing phenomenon that different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups exist therein with their own varied cultural subsystems. This great Indian diversity can be discovered and appreciated if only adequate attention is paid to the study of frontier communities. Marriage and family practices exhibit a wide variety of patterns. Matriliney has existed in South as well as in North-East India. Though it has almost disappeared from the Hindu community of Nairs in Kerala, it is still cherished and followed among the Muslim Islanders of Lakshadweep and among the tribal, both Christian and non-Christian, inhabitants of the hill State of Meghalaya.

It gives me great pleasure that Dr. Pariyaram M. Chacko has brought out this timely volume on the changing trends of the matrilineal system of Meghalaya. It is quite gratifying to note that most of the papers are contributed by scholars who themselves are from within the matrilineal system. Their own experiences, observations and perspectives carry a special authenticity and convey to the readers the insiders' view of tradition and change in their own society. I have no doubt that this book is a valuable contribution to the literature on the emerging family trends in North-East India.

**Prof. Barrister Pakem**  
Vice-Chancellor  
North-Eastern Hill University  
Shillong, Meghalaya

## Acknowledgements

---

I wish to thank all the authors for their contributions. All these papers except one were read during a one-day seminar which was organised with a financial grant from the Indian Council of Social Science Research, North-Eastern Regional Centre. Thanks are due to ICSSR-NERC for its support. I am indebted to Mr. P.S. Thomas and Mr. Godfrey Pathaw for their secretarial assistance.

Shillong

**Pariyaram M. Chacko**

## Contents

---

<i>Foreword</i>	v
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Contributors</i>	xi
1. Introduction <i>Pariyaram M. Chacko</i>	1
2. Matrilineal System: Some Structural Implications <i>Pariyaram M. Chacko</i>	10
3. The Khasi Concept of Family: Changes in Structure and Function <i>Juanita War</i>	16
4. The Khasi Matriliney: Its Past and its Future <i>Sobblei Sngi Lyngdoh</i>	31
5. Religion and Matriliney in Khasi Society: Some Observations <i>I.M Syiem</i>	46
6. The Impact of Christianity on the Khasi-Jaintia Matrilineal Family <i>O.L. Snaitang</i>	54
7. Changes in the Matrilineal System of the Khasi- Jaintia Family <i>Philomath Passab</i>	74
8. Some Aspects of Change in the Family System of the Khasis <i>Aldila Mawlong</i>	80

9. Christian Values Encounter Family in Meghalaya <i>Dominic Jala</i>	94
10. Status of Garo Women in the Nineteenth Century <i>Frederick S. Downs</i>	98
11. Select Bibliography <i>Pariyaram M. Chacko</i>	107
<i>Index</i>	113

## Contributors

---

**Aldila Mawlong** is doing her Ph.D. in the Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

**Dominic Jala SDB** is Provincial of the Salesian Province at Gauhati.

**Frederick S. Downs** is Professor of History at the United Theological College, Bangalore.

**I.M. Syiem** teaches Sociology at St. Edmund's College, Shillong.

**Juanita War** is Professor, Department of Linguistics, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

**O.L. Snaitang** is Professor of History at Serampore Theological College.

**Pariyaram M. Chacko** is Reader, Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

**Philomath Passah** is Professor, Department of Economics, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

**Sohblei Sngi Lyngdoh** is an indigenous and activist missionary. He teaches Theology at Sacred Heart Theological College, Shillong.



## Introduction

*Pariyaram M. Chacko*

---

Meghalaya, a small hill state in the north-eastern part of India is the abode of three matrilineal tribes, namely the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos. The first two tribes are very similar to each other and both use Khasi as written language though the Jaintias have their own dialect. According to the 1991 census there are 1,760,626 people in Meghalaya. The Khasi region of the state has 8,74,622 people, the Jaintia hills have a population of 2,19,186 and the Garo region has a population of 6,66,818. About 81 per cent of the population in Meghalaya consists of the tribals. The state is mostly spread on a mountainous region. Most of the indigenous people are engaged in agriculture. Shifting cultivation is still common. However a sizable population have taken up modern professions, a large number being employed in Government and semi-Government institutions. Many are found in trade and business concerns.

Before the Britishers established their supremacy in the early nineteenth century, the region relatively remained isolated. The British annexed Khasi Hills in 1833 and the Jaintia Hills in 1835. The Christian missionaries arrived in 1841. These events opened up the region to the outside world. Some non-tribals came to work in different capacities. The modern system of administration along with its legal framework came into the midst of the tribals. The traditional economy was greatly disturbed by the introduction of monetary and market economy. The introduction and expansion of road and other

communication channels was breaking down the age-old isolation of the hill tribes. The Christian missionaries introduced the Roman script and transformed the Khasi and the Garo dialects into written languages. The missionary effort popularised education. Shillong, the state capital, is known throughout the north-eastern region of India as a centre of education. A good standard of health care and hygiene also was set. Many tribals became Christians. As per the 1991 census of India, 64 per cent of Meghalaya people are Christians. Since 1971 Meghalaya is a full-fledged state within India with all its benefits and responsibilities. Its government is run by the tribals themselves. Today the people of Meghalaya are no longer isolated.

### **The Matrilineal Units of the Khasis**

The largest matrilineal unit of the Khasis is the *Kur* (clan). The members of a clan believed themselves descended from an ancestor, *Ka Iawbei Tynrai*. Genealogical relationship between clan members cannot be traced. The *kur* are strictly exogamous and any inter-marriage between its members is considered the worst sin a Khasi can commit. Each clan has its own *cromlech* (*Mawbah*) where the bones of their members are interned. Besides, each clan has its common land and a council. Those members of a clan who live in one domestic unit or in different domestic units in the same neighbourhood constitute a lineage or *Kpoh*. Attendance of all members of a *kpoh* is the norm for common functions like marriage and death.

All the descendants of a grand-mother along with the youngest daughter (*Khaddub*) and the ancestral house usually constitutes *Iing*, family. Children address their mother's sisters and female maternal cousins as mothers. Their spouses are classificatory fathers. The eldest living brother (*Kni*) exercises authority in all matters. The household unit of a mother, her husband and children is also called *Iing*. While the *Khaddub's* husband is expected to reside with her, all other sisters settle nearby in their own independent households with their husbands and children. Thus fission of an *Iing* is a frequent feature unlike the *tharavad* of the Nairs of South

India. In such independent households, the authority of the *Kni* is not as pervasive as in his natal *Iing*. Though most of the wealth is inherited by *Khaddub*, she is only a custodian. It is the *Kni* who manages the property on her behalf. Traditionally, the *Khaddub* had the financial responsibility of looking after the welfare of all the *Iing* members and of ensuring proper religious rites at the appropriate occasions. However, *Kni* carried out these tasks on her behalf and he was also the priest and chief celebrant in all rituals as there was no separate institution of priesthood nor any institutionalised religion. In contrast to the *Kni*, the husband of the *Khaddub* had no great role to play except that of procreation. If he wanted to exercise any power, he could do so as *Kni* in his own natal *Iing*. In traditional times, the marriages were arranged by the *Kni* who himself blessed them in a simple ceremony at the bride's residence. There was no dowry nor bride price. The marriage was monogamous though divorce and remarriage were permitted.

Though *Kur* and *Kpob* still exist their hold over the people has been on the wane. The authority and sanctity of *Kni* have come under pressure. He does not wield much power in conducting his sister's household affairs. Many *Khaddubs* exercise proprietary rights over landed property. A large number of Khasi men and women have taken up modern professions and have fixed income. They seem to set up nuclear households along with their husbands. Christianity has introduced a set of values regarding family and marriage like the sanctity of the marriage, the importance of a father, and avoidance of pre-marital and extra-marital sex. The assimilation of these values has given rise to giving more importance to a child's father than to his mother's brother. The institution of the *Khaddub* is closely associated with the traditional religion. Since the spread of Christianity, the *Khaddub* no longer plays the role of a custodian of the religion, its rites and its *Mawbah*. *Kni's* function as a priest has also vanished.

There are many surmises and opinions expressed by various authors about the Khasi matriliney and the changes that have taken place therein. However very few research works based on fieldwork are available on the subject. Nakane's<sup>1</sup> study is an excellent one based on field data. Many authors

assert that the lion's share of the property goes to the *Khaddub*. However no one is sure how much is this lion's share? What is the exact share given to each sister of an *ling*? Besides property issues, we have also no real data on marriage stability. We also need to know more exactly the gains the husbands have made in the changed circumstances. Have they come to play more authoritative role in his wife's *ling*? In a remarkable paper, Nongbri asserts that "the Khasi matrilineal system does not actually favour women although certain aspects of their ideology and inheritance rules may give a contrary impression."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, "The rights and privileges of women in Khasi matriliney turn out to be mere burdensome duties and responsibilities."<sup>3</sup> According to Nongbri, the male bias is reflected in the Meghalaya Succession to Self Acquired Property Act 1984. The subordination of women is seen in their exclusion from the *durbars* and other political wings. According to her the attempt made by some organisations to project matrilineal descent as detrimental to economic interest is a dangerous portend as it will further reduce the importance of the Khasi women.<sup>4</sup> In the light of the differing perceptions of the Khasi matriliney, there is a need for more quantitative and qualitative data. The writings of the scholars who themselves are from the matrilineal community will constitute rich materials for new insights and perspectives. In this aspect this volume will be a welcome addition to the literature on matriliney.

Pariyaram M. Chacko in his paper on *Matrilineal System: Some Structural Implications* aims at apprising the readers about some structural characteristics of the matriliney compared to patriliney. Since descent is traced through female and authority is vested with the male matrikin, there is an immense difference in matriliney. The structural prerequisites of maintaining the systems require that the status of the father is downgraded, father-children relationship is underplayed and the stability of the marriage is not emphasized. All these notions are contrary to patrilineal values. Therefore, some patrilineal people view the matrilineal system with some bias little knowing that matriliney is not merely tracing descent through female sex, but is loaded with certain values regarding marriage fatherhood, and motherhood.

Juanita War delves deep into the various units of the family among the Khasis and the Jaintias in her paper on *The Khasi Concept of Family: Changes in Structure and Functions*. Although *Ka iing tnat* is the smallest household unit, for all practical purposes *ka iing* is the effective family unit. After discussing various matrilineal units like, *Iing*, *Kpob* and *Kur*, their functions are discussed in detail. As in all matrilineal societies, so too in Khasi society there are several sets of conflict situations. Some of these are: conflicts between nuclear family and matrilineal descent groups; the conflict between natal and conjugal loyalties; the conflict between ownership of the property and authority, and the conflict between a man's children and his sister's children. Education, urbanisation, employment opportunities in non-agricultural sectors and change from subsistence economy to market economy have undermined the traditional matrilineal structures. As a result of these, increasing importance is being given to elementary families (husband-wife units). The *Iing*, the *Kpob* and the *Kur* are no longer strong forces of social cohesion and solidarity as they were in the past.

Sohblei Sngi Lyngdoh is an indigenous missionary with a lot of pastoral experience. His paper entitled, *The Khasi Matriliney: Its Past and its Future* is the outcome of his own experience and observation. His emotional involvement with his own people is reflected in his earnest concern for the welfare of his society. He believes that in the original matrilineal system of the Khasis, the *Kni* played the crucial role. He was the centre of the authority and the economy. He was the pivot around which his sisters and their children revolved. The father of the children was merely a genitor with no important role to play in his wife's family. The uncle's authority was so powerful that he could punish severely recalcitrant nephews and neices. He was the chief administrator of all goods, movable and immovable, which were principally earned by him. He was also the priest, the teacher and the intermediary between God and his sister's children. He acted also as a medicine man. Even before the Britishers arrived the system had undergone change, because the Khasis discarded the following simple law: in every village there should be more or less an equal number of cognate and agnate families (*Ki*

*Kur* and *Kikba*) so that they can easily find marriage partners within the village. When spouses had to be sought in distant villages, the traditional system could not survive and the husbands were forced to stay with their wives. The *Kni* slowly disappeared from his sister's house. Sngi Lyngdoh thinks that the disintegration of the ancient matriliney started much before the Britishers or the Christian missionaries arrived. However the Britishers contributed to the decline of the uncle's authority, by recognising the *Khaddub* as the heiress. Christianity as such has not brought about any change. It did not interfere with the system. The Khasi society is going through a difficult period because though the uncle has lost his pivotal role, the father has not yet attained his due role. There is an authority vacuum. There is no one to bring up the children in proper discipline. The father is still an outsider. The need of the hour for the Khasis is to stop this drift.

The subject of discussion, in I.M. Syiem's paper, *Religion and Matriliny in Khasi Society: Some Observations*, is the relationship between religion and matriliney. The Khasi religion is not an organised one and it functions at the family and at the clan level. It is inextricably bound up with the matrilineal practices. The eldest uncle is the spiritual mediator and the *Khaddub* is the keeper of the religion. The *Kni* invokes both God and Grandmother who are equally responsible for the well-being of the clan. The Khasi religion, *Ka niam* is vital for the preservation of the matriliney. Since Christianity has replaced the traditional religion, the matrilineal system is bound to change in some ways. However many converted Christians have not internalized the Christian values and many are influenced by the local practices. Many of them still consult the traditional diviners to find out the causes of their misfortunes. Abandoning the traditional faith while retaining matriliney does not seem to be an easy task. The most vital challenge to the system has not come from Christianity, but from within the Khasi society itself. Property ownership has become a pivotal issue. The younger generations are questioning the trusteeship of the *Khaddub* and demanding a share for themselves, particularly for the sons.

O.L. Snaitang, an indigenous theologian exposes a novel idea that Christianity did not destabilise the matrilineal

system, but actually contributed to its strengthening. With increasing exposure to the British rule and the patrilineal cultures all around, the Khási matriliney, would have crumbled but for the support of the churches. The church helped modify the system to survive. By disallowing frequent divorces and polygamy on the part of men, the marriage system was stabilised. By popularising education and health care, the church strengthened the capacity of the people to successfully adjust to a modern world. O.L. Snaitang's theory is true in a short term span; but the structural implications of the stability of the marriage and the increasing responsibility of the male parenthood are that they would militate against the system in the long run. The paper *The Impact of Christianity in the Khasi-Jaintia Family* also traces the possible origin of the matriliney among the Khasis. One can see some similarity between them and the Nairs of Kerala. The Khasi-Jaintia men were hunters and raiders who rarely settled down in a home. The Nair men were mostly soldiers who spent most of their time away from home. Matriliney was a suitable arrangement in such a scenario. Snaitang believes that only theoretically the women enjoyed status, while they were almost like bonded labourers.

Philomath Passah in his short article recounts the traditional as well as the changing roles of the youngest daughter and of the maternal uncle among the Khasis and the Jaintias. The custodial right of the property in the hands of the youngest daughters have now become an absolute right. Husbands slowly replace the functions of the maternal uncles in the care of children and in the decision making process. Khasi associations like *Ka Seny Iktiar Longbriew Manbriew and Syngkong Rympei Thymmai* have made attempts to change the traditional inheritance laws in favour of the males. The Meghalaya succession to self-acquired property (Khasi and Jaintia Special Provision) Act 1984, empowering the parents to bequeath their self-acquired property has not been implemented.

Aldila Mawlong's paper *Some Aspects of Change in the Family System of the Khasis*, is the only one which presents the result of a field-survey. The study was conducted in 1995 in the city of Shillong. This paper is based on her M.Phil dissertation submitted to the North-Eastern Hill University.<sup>5</sup>

She interviewed 80 married individuals equally divided between men and women. Ninety per cent of the men and eighty per cent of the women were of the opinion that the husbands should be the head of the household; so too the majority think that the role of the *Kni* is now more symbolic than decisive. Ninetyfive per cent of the women and sixty-two per cent of the men think that the property should be equally divided to all sons and daughters. These results make it abundantly clear whither the winds of change are blowing. The matrilineal system has undoubtedly weakened. Equal opportunities for all children are demanded. The conjugal family ties are getting stronger at the expense of other kinship ties. However, the matrilineal descent principle is sustained, because many Khasis think that their culture is bound up with matrilineity.

Dominic Jala in his brief paper, *Christian Values Encounter Family in Meghalaya* enunciates some of the Christian values on marriage and family. Many changes have occurred in Meghalaya families due to education, health care and to new occupational avenues. Christianity as such has never attempted to destroy the matrilineal culture. However, the Church is clear that marriage is a sacred bond which is not to be lightly treated. The stability of marriage is the foundation of good family life.

*Status of Garo Women in the Nineteenth Century* is the only one in this volume about the Garos. Frederick S. Downs, an historian, discusses the status of women in the Garo tribe by evaluating two written sources of the nineteenth century. One was a letter written by a Garo association to the Baptist missionaries in 1897. This letter while acknowledging that "the woman is the master of the riches of the house," castigates them for their evil ways; for they despised their husbands and taught evil to their daughters. The letter thanks the missionaries for their help in making them behave well. The other source was a paper by Miriam Russell, a lady missionary, which was presented in a Baptist Missionary Conference at Nagaon in 1886. According to her "the women are not honored by the men but are really held in contempt by them... the word of the man is the law that governs her actions." As an historian, Frederick S. Downs evaluates both



these sources in terms of their authorship and purpose. It is concluded that Russel's paper is a more credible source regarding the status of Garo women. This is corroborated by some later anthropological literature. The traditional Garo society was matrilineal with strong patriarchal values.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Nankane, Chie, Garo and Khasi, *A Comparative Study in Matrilineal Systems*, Paris. Monton and Company, 1967.
2. Nongbri, Tiplut, "Gender and the Khasi Family Structure: Some Implications of the Meghalaya Succession to Self-Acquired Property Act 1984", *Sociological Bulletin*, 37 (1 & 2) 1988, p. 79.
3. Ibid. p. 76.
4. Nongbri Tiplut, "Tribal Women and the Family in the Context of Meghalaya", Paper presented in Seminar on Changing Aspects of Family in Meghalaya, Dept. of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, March 1988.
5. Mawlong, Aldila, Aspects of Change in the Family system Among the Khasis, M.Phil. dissertation, Department of Sociology, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, 1996.

## Matrilineal System: Some Structural Implications

*Pariyaram M. Chacko*

---

Though scholars may present a dispassionate and unbiased view of the matrilineal system, the same cannot be said about the majority of the patrilineal people who come in contact with the matrilineal population. They tend to believe that the matrilineal system is inferior to that of patriliney. They look down upon particularly their sexual, marital and family customs and practices. The superior attitude of the patrilineal people arises out of incorrect understanding of matriliney and also out of their own psychological and social disposition towards patrilineal system where they have been born and nurtured.

In Meghalaya and also in Lakshadweep Islands, the majority of the people still actively follow matriliney. The Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos practise matriliney with some variations. Though the Nair Community of Kerala has been by far the most famous matrilineal people of India among the anthropological and sociological literature, scholars seem to have lost interest in them because of the disappearance of matriliney from amongst them.

### **The Features of Matrilineal System**

According to a theory the early human society lived in promiscuity. Because of the biological factors of pregnancy and childbirth, it was easier to trace biological relationship of

children to their mothers, than to their fathers. Hence human organisation at a later stage revolved around mothers than around fathers. From matriliney, there evolved patriliney when men were able to assert their superiority. This evolutionary theory from promiscuity to patriliney via matriliney is now discarded. Both patrilineal and matrilineal systems have developed and flourished independently.

By far one of the most impressive theoretical analyses about the comparative characteristics of the matrilineal and the patrilineal systems is found in the book *Matrilineal Kinship* edited by David M. Schneider and K. Gough.<sup>1</sup> The following features of the matrilineal principles are discussed by Schneider. According to him, both patriliney and matriliney have three characteristics in common.<sup>2</sup> They are: (i) In both, unilineal descent groups are exogamous (ii) Women have primary responsibility for the care of children (iii) Men have authority over women and children. However in patrilineal systems, the male sex is used as the criterion for the descent membership while in matrilineal system the principle of affiliation is the female sex. Though it may look very simple at first, there is a world of difference between the two systems.

The critical difference between the two systems is that while both the principle of group membership and the line of authority run through the male line in patrilineal societies, they are separated, between males and females in matrilineal systems, that is, while the principle of group membership runs through the female sex, the line of authority goes through the male sex. This crucial difference makes matriliney a complex institution, more complex than that of patriliney. The most important corollary that follows is that in patrilineal descent groups, women when being married are completely transferred to their affinal group, while in matrilineal descent groups married men are not completely transferred to their affinal group and they retain their membership and authority in their natal groups. "Matrilineal descent groups depend for their continuity and operation on retaining control over both male and female members."<sup>3</sup> In patriliney, the women are completely assimilated into the group where they are married and they are not needed by their own natal descent groups for their continuity.

In all matrilineal societies, the male members when marrying can have only limited options.<sup>4</sup> They can get assimilated into their wives' groups. However, they will be stiffly resisted by the male members of their wives' groups. A constant conflict will be the end-result of this attempt at assimilation into the wives' groups. The second option is that the married men can exercise complete control over their children and wives and wean them away from their matrilineal groups. In this case, the matrilineal system will break down and patriliney will inevitably arise. The third way is that they "live in peace" in their wives' groups. The structural constraint is that an in-marriage male affine cannot be given authoritative role in the group. A male should exercise that role in his own matrilineal group. A matrilineal system can survive and flourish, if only the males are completely dependent on their own natal matrilineal descent groups except for the minimal necessity of marriage. The moment they are alienated from their group, and either join wives' group or set up independent households, it will sound the death-knell of the system. Matriliney requires an "interdependence of brother and sister."<sup>5</sup> The sister depends on her brother for protection and authority functions, while the brother needs her and her offspring for the continuity of his own natal descent line.

The statuses of mother and wife are meticulously sustained in patrilineal societies. In contrast the statuses of father and husband are dispensable in matrilineal systems, though men are required as genitors. Sometimes even the recognition of a father can be conveniently ignored as reflected in the saying about the Nairs "No Nair knows his father". According to Schneider: "the institutionalization of very strong, lasting or intense solidarities between husband and wife is not compatible with the maintenance of matrilineal descent groups."<sup>6</sup> There is an in-built conflict between marital bond and the bond of descent both for the husband and the wife. The system demands priority for the descent even at the expense of close husband-wife relationship. Strong and intense affection and loyalty are required between mother and her children; equally strong affectionate bond between father and her children are discouraged. Deep emotional attachment between father and his children will lead to strain and conflict in the

mother's descent groups. So, too, lasting economic co-operation between a father and his child must be discouraged lest it should threaten the system. A firm link between fathers and their sons will break their matrilineal groups. The system demands that the father let go their hold over his own sons so that they become successors of their mothers' brothers and the father accepts his own sisters' sons as his own successors. From patrilineal point of view it is an unenviable task. The matrilineal system requires that a man or a woman constantly balances his or her conjugal interest with the interests of his or her descent group. Ultimately the welfare of the descent is more important, otherwise, the system cannot survive. About the Nairs, Kathleen Gough writes "In all possible respects, efforts seem to have been made to reduce the intensity of marital ties for the sake of the unity of taravad, village and kingdom. Good men were men who devoted themselves first to the service of their feudal lords and second to the welfare of their taravad. Weak and immoral men were men who became inveigled by their wives and their children, so that they tried to make unnecessary gifts to their wives and neglected their taravad."<sup>7</sup>

All these structural features are found among the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo systems of matriliney. If we find, that marriages are unstable or husband-wife and father-child relationships are weak in these societies as compared with patrilineal ones, it is not that the persons concerned consciously and deliberately plan them so. Nor can it be attributed to purely personal failures. These are the structural constraints. Moreover, people from the patrilineal societies have their own conceptual biases. For example, the notions of marriage and family as they are understood or practised by the patrilineal people do not have universal validity. Different societies have different systems of marriage and family. Some of the weaknesses of the matrilineal system as viewed from patrilineal point of view, turn out to be its strengths so that the system can survive. If scholars analyse the patrilineal system from a matrilineal perspective, structural weaknesses of the system can be enumerated such as subjugation of women, denial of liberty and of property rights to them and so on.

Nakane, a Japanese anthropologist who studied the Khasi-Garo system in 1950s, notes that the divorces are quite common among the Khasis, particularly divorce rate among the *Khaddubs* is greater than among the other daughters.<sup>8</sup> Here again, there is a definitional problem. The divorce among the matrilineal societies does not have the same validity and significance as in the patrilineal societies. Once there was intense debate among the sociologists and the anthropologists, whether the *Sambandham* among the Nairs whereby a woman could accept as many as a dozen visiting husbands could be termed as a marriage. For patrilineal people, *Sambandham* was highly unstable, and the divorce rate was very high as many husbands stopped visiting their wives. Such notions do not seem to take note of the fact that in matrilineal system, the descent stability, and its perpetuation are more important than marital stability, conjugal relationship, incidence of divorces, desertion of wives or husbands, filial bond between the father and his son and so on. The ordinary definitions of all these concepts are inapplicable in a matrilineal environment.

Some Khasis themselves have started writing about the low status of man among them, and about the unscrupulous daughters who exploit the system either alone or in connivance with the outsiders. Some of them do feel that the system of inheritance is detrimental to the full development of the sons and also to the economic development of the Meghalaya.<sup>9</sup> Vitiating in the system or the exploitation of the system does not necessarily mean that matriliney is undesirable or there should be a change to patriliney.

#### REFERENCES

1. Schneider, David, M. and Kathleen Gough (eds.), *Matrilineal Kinship*, Univ. of California Press, California, 1961.
2. "The Distinctive Features of Matrilineal Descent Groups" in David Schneider and Kathleen Gough. *op. cit.*, p. 5.
3. *Ibid.* p. 8.
4. *Ibid.* p. 9. According to Schneider, these options are for those males who may not have any authoritative role (such as younger brothers) to play in their own descent groups.

5. Ibid. p. 11.
  6. Ibid. p. 16.
  7. "Nayar: Central Kerala" in David Schneider and Kathleen Gough, *op. cit.*, pp. 360-361.
  8. Nakane, Chie, *Garo and Khasi: A Comparative Study in Matrilineal system*. Mouton & Co. The Hague, Paris, 1967 p. 133.
  9. See Badwar, Magdalene, "Some Institutional Factors Retarding Economic Progress Among the Khasi Community" (Mimeo), Paper presented in a Seminar in NEHU, 1987.
- Pynshai Bor Syiemlieh, *The Khasis and their Matrilineal System*, Shillong, 1994.

## The Khasi Concept of Family: Changes in Structure and Function

*Juanita War*

---

### **Introduction**

The Khasi — Pnar people, also known as *Ki Hynniewtrep-Hynniewskum*, have lived in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills from time immemorial.<sup>1</sup> They were more or less isolated within their own 'shnong' (villages), and surrounding areas that could be reached within a few day's journey. *Ka ri ki laiphew syiem* (the land of the thirty kings chiefs) also known as *ka ri u Hynniewtrep* (the land of *Hynniewstrep*), consisted of densely forested hills inaccessible to the "mynder" (outsider). Contacts with the outside world were usually through raids into the plains of Assam or Sylhet, and through occasional trading during market days.

The British initially entered the hills in the early Nineteenth century to negotiate for trade routes between Kamrup and Sylhet. Within a short span of time, they conquered the whole of the Khasi hills, setting up headquarters first in Mairang, then in Shillong. They brought with them a new system of administration within the British Raj, along with government institutions and machineries. They introduced advanced transport and communication system, sanatoria, hospitals, and all other infrastructures of a modern society. Along with these, they introduced an international language into hitherto monolingual society. The Welsh Missionaries brought



Christianity, a writing system through the Roman script, male and female literacy through educational institutions and new vocational skills. These were instrumental in changing the socio-economic life of the Khasis.

Along with the British came the "*dkbar*" (plainsmen) — as labourers, clerks, interpreters and government functionaries. They also brought with them new languages, religion and life-styles. The impact of this crisscrossing of different cultures, religions and languages on the tiny, isolated Khasi community has been tremendous. A complete sea-change came about in almost all areas of life, political, economic and socio-cultural within a space of fifty years or so, the once isolated rural communities have been hurled into the world of bigger, more modern, and technologically advanced societies and into the civilizations that are centuries old.

The Khasi society is still reeling under the impact, trying to stand as single identifiable group in a sea of diverse races and culture without being assimilated by the more dominant group. As a society in transition, it is still suffering from the traumas and tensions as it strives to retain its identity, and at the same time it moves on to become a modern literate society within the bigger, yet somewhat alien concept of a 'nation'. Keeping pace with the technological and electronic age has sapped the society of its strength. To add to the pressure is the tendency to cling on to its ancient and customary practices, some of which may be no longer relevant or feasible.

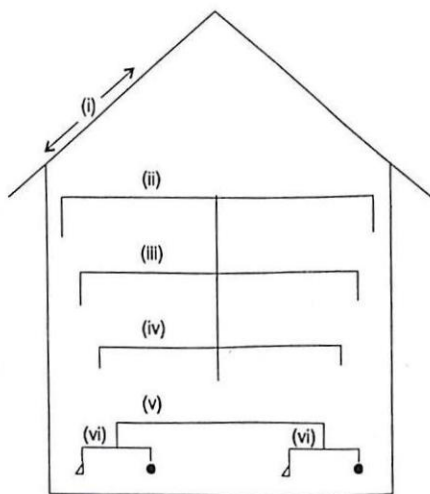
The preservation of a distinct identity in the midst of an enormous tide of influx, is a near impossible task. Such a great strain is bound to leave inevitable effects on the society. Transitional societies are dynamic, i.e., in a state of flux. Being unstable, they are perhaps more susceptible to influences which may come from outside, as a result of societal contacts, or from within, as a reaction to these changes. The amount of permeability of societies to changes will probably depend on (i) the strength of social cohesion and solidarity of that particular society, (ii) the strength of pressures for changes from outside, (iii) the strength of pressures for changes from inside. As mentioned earlier, pressures for changes from outside on the Khasi society have been tremendous. These have in turn weakened internal social mechanisms that have survived

for centuries. The resultant effects are the lessening of social solidarity and the increasing of pressures for changes from within. To substantiate this point we will examine the Khasi family structures, and their resultant changes.

### **Khasi Concept of Family and Family Structures**

Like most small tribal groups, the Khasis have survived as a community because of a complex network of family structures and relationships which bind the families, the clans (*Kur*), and the tribe together into a socially cohesive whole. Khasi being a matrilineal society gives primary importance to relationships with the matrilineal kin. Lineage and descent are traced through the female. Inheritance is confined to the matri-kin. The family structures consist mainly of the matri-kin members. They form a residential unit, as well as a socio-economic group. The Khasi families, have been bonded together by the household religion. In stressing the importance of the matri-kin, we are not to undermine the importance and role of relatives from the father's side, especially that of the father himself as the progenitor (*ukpaki khun*, or the father of children), paternal grandmother (*mei-kha* or 'mother-birth'), paternal grandmother (*parad*), paternal uncles (*pasan*, *pekhyinnab*) and paternal aunts (*kha*). These relationships through marriages are important for social cohesion and solidarity. These ties closely knit one individual to another, and one *kur* to another *kur*.

To understand the Khasi concepts of 'family', we need to postulate different levels of family structures. They are given here.



A diagram of family levels

- i) *Hynniewtrei-Hynniewskum* (Khasis)
- ii) *Ka Kur* (clan) and *Iawbei Tynrai* (root ancestress)
- iii) *Ka Jait* (sub-clan), *Iawbei Tymmen* (old ancestress) and common surname.
- iv) *Ka Kpoh* (lineage) and *Iawbei khynraw* (young ancestress).
- v) *Ka Iing* (family), common *Meirad Tymmen* (great grand mother) and *Meieit* (grand mother)
- vi) *Ka Iing-Tnat*,<sup>2</sup> common *Mei/Kmie* (mother).

The smallest unit (level vi) termed here as *Iing-tnat* (literally branch-family) is the elementary family or household. Though the concept of an elementary or nuclear family has always existed, it is unclear why there is no separate word used for this family unit. The word *Iing* is conterminous for the family structures at level (v) and (vi). It can be hypothesized that in traditional Khasi society in the past, nuclear families were almost non-entities as independent units. Each household was linked to a bigger unit i.e., a corporate group of married sisters and their families, whose epicentre was the *Iing-kur* also called *Iing-Seng* (foundation-house) or *Iing Khadduh* (house of the youngest daughter). When the daughters other than the youngest and the sons marry, they were usually exhorted to establish their own families (*ban seng ia la ka Iing*) with parental or family help if possible such as the allotment of a plot of land, or the gift of some money. In such cases residence became neo-local. In the case of the youngest daughter, her husband came to reside her in the natal home.

The smallest family unit or household consists of the mother, father and their offsprings. It is a nuclear family structure in terms of co-residence, sharing common resources and fulfilling family roles, e.g., the father as provider (*u kpa uba lab uba ia*) and the mother as house-holder and keeper of the home (*kmie ka Iing*). In the case of the youngest daughter (*ka khadduh*), the family unit also includes her parents, widowed or divorced or single brothers and sisters, or any member of the *Iing* who has fallen into bad times. In a way, the *Iing* at the natal house is a joint family.

All married sisters and cousin sisters on the mother's side and their families, along with the *Iing-seng* or *Iing-khadduh*, constitute *Ka Iing*. They are descendants of a great grandmother, and are closely related. All the sisters of the mother

are also *Mei* (mother). They are addressed depending on their birth order, *Meisan* (older mother), *Meideng* (middle mother), *Meinab* (young mother), and *Meidub* (last mother). Their spouses are *Pa* (father), *Pasan*, *Padeng*, *Panab*, *Padub* and so on. First cousins from the mother's side are "*sbi-para arkmie*" (brothers and sisters from two mothers). Maternal grandparents are *Mei-ieit* (literally, love-mother) and *Pa-ieit* (love-father). These kinship terms stress the fact of an 'extended' family consisting of many mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. The mother's brothers (*ki kni*), have great authority in the extended *Iing*. They are addressed appropriately as *Mabeb* or *Ma Rangbab* i.e. big or oldest uncle, *Madeng* (Middle uncle), *Makbynnab* (young uncle) and *Madub* or last uncle. They act as advisers, counsellors, mediators, and helpers in times of need (*u kni ba ka iap ba ka im*, i.e., the maternal uncle in times of life and death). This closely-related *matrikin* unit forms a domestic, socio-economic and religious intra-group community. The *Iing* can be understood as an extended family without members being co-residential.

Certain binding forces and familial symbols served to knit the members of the *Iing* together. They are: (1) A common (great) grandmother. (2) The number of households within a specific matrilineal descent group, and all members herein. (3) Common ancestor cult. (4) Common household deities and household religion. (5) Common 'priest' in the oldest maternal uncle (*kni rangbab*). (6) Common *Iing Seng* or *Iing Niam* (literally, 'House-religion') as a sanctuary. (7) Common ancestral property (if any).

All members of a descent group trace their descent to a great-grandmother who, if still alive, resides in the natal house or *Ing-Seng*. The parental/ancestral house is the centre of all family affairs, including religious rites and rituals. This *Iing* also represents a sanctuary, a place of family worships and rituals, as well as a place of refuge. It is a place where the larger extended family gathers in times of joy and in times of sorrow, in lighter moments for the warmth of kith and kin, and in weightier moments for crucial family decisions, calamities, death and sickness.

### The Functions of the *Iing*

1. The *Iing* functions as a social community which gathers members together for all family events, religious or otherwise. Social relations within the descent group of the *Iing* are also maintained by regular visits among family members. When the nuclear families constituting the *Iing* are within reasonable distances, it is quite common for families of married daughters and sons to 'drop in' for a plate of rice or a cup of tea, either at the *Iing Khaddub* or in each other's families. Next to the nuclear family, the *Iing* functions as a basic social group where children are socialized.
2. Older members of the *Iing* have the important duty of imparting moral and social instructions (*ka sneng ke kraw, ka kdew ka pyni*) to the young. *Ki Jinganeng Tymmen* (old people's instruction) include, codes of conduct, social etiquette and manners and customary practices.
3. The *Iing* also functions as a welfare organisation. The aged, the destitute, the handicapped, the orphaned and the widowed are all taken care of by those who are fit and productive. The natal house or *Iing kur* is a place of refuge, and one of the duties of the *Khaddub* is to look after such members and to distribute pooled resources for their welfare. It is unthinkable for any *Iing* to leave any of its members uncared for, hence beggars as such are unknown among the Khasis.
4. Khasi religion being basically a house-hold religion, the *Iing* functions as a religious unit. Members gather together in the *Iing-Niam* on occasions like births, naming ceremonies, engagements, wedding, deaths, bone interment, and other rituals like *ka knia Ai bam and ka phen ka kyrpad* as propitiation to household deities. The seniormost uncle (*kni rangbah*) usually acts as the family priest, while the duty of the *khaddub* is to prepare the necessary items for the rites and rituals. She epitomises the family religion, and is referred to as the one who "keeps the religion" (*kaba bet ia ka niam*). However, the *khaddub* is not a "priestess" as wrongly stated

by many writers, since she does not actually perform any ceremony.

5. The *Iing* functions as an economic unit in the distribution and sharing of land, resources and family property. The *Iing* may own some land or common property which may be used or divided among all constituent nuclear families. It is common for an *Iing* having some land, to allot plots to married daughters so that they can set up their own families. The sons are also given property for their use. The *khadduh* is the custodian of ancestral property for common use; she is not an "heiress" as wrongly reported in the literature. The actual management of ancestral or common property is in the hands of maternal uncles who are the executive authority in the matri-kin group. If the *Iing* does not have enough or any property, the *khadduh* may be the one who is in need of help from more prosperous sisters. In such cases, the position of the *khadduh* is far from enviable, since she has to bear the *Iing's* burdens.
6. The *Iing* functions as a family council or 'durbar' where maternal uncles (*kni*), grand parents, parents (*ki kmie ki kpa*) and older members of the family deliberate about marriages, deaths, family rituals, property and other family affairs. In the past the maternal uncles were vested with higher authority and power than the other members. They are advisers, managers, and executives of family affairs. However, women members too have power in decision making.
7. Finally the *Iing* functions as a political unit, since senior male members especially the *kni*, usually represent the *Iing* in the clan council (*Durbar kur*).

The management and execution of all the above social, religious, economic and political functions, is made possible by the usual residential patterns in the past. The constituent households or nuclear families were usually in the same village, or even in the same hillock or compound. At the most, they were scattered only within the nearby villages. This close physical proximity of families not only gave a sense of oneness, but made it possible for the *Iing* to function as a larger

family unit. The members too were emotionally attached to one another.

*Ka kpob* specifies a family consisting of all descendants of *Ka lawbei khynraw* (young ancestress). They are of the same lineage; blood relationship is real and the degree of kinship is traceable, though not as close<sup>14</sup> as among members of the *Iing*. It is extremely difficult to arrive at any definite conclusion regarding the generational depth of its members. The Khasis do not keep written records of genealogical lines, but trace their descent to whatever generation that they are likely to remember, usually upto five-six generations. Kinship terms across generation can perhaps throw some light on this. There is no kinship term to indicate persons beyond five generations. Unlike the *Iing*, the *Kpob* is not a functional unit, though close ties are maintained whenever possible, such as sickness, marriages, deaths and bone burial.

Nakane has defined the *kpob* as a group of matrilineal *kin* usually confined to one domestic family or group of households, linked by direct extension of the main household. She also perceives the *kpob* as a religious and ritual unit which shares a household religion as well as a common grandmother or great grandmother.<sup>3</sup> Gurdon states that the Khasis when reckoning descent, count from the mother only; they speak of a family of brothers and sisters, who are the great grand children of one great grandmother as *shi kpob*, which literally translated, is one womb, i.e., the issue of one womb.<sup>4</sup> However, both descriptions seem to refer to the Khasi *Iing* rather than the *kpob*. Pakyntein observes that the *Iing* extends to five generations and the *kpob* to ten generations.<sup>5</sup> Hence a common (great) grandmother upto four generations only, is not the ancestress of a *kpob*, but of an *Iing*. Nongbri categorically states, that the *kpob* is not a functional unit but the *Iing* is.<sup>6</sup> However, Nongbri's observation that the *kpob* comprises members born of a common great-grandmother may be re-examined.

*Ka jait* (sub-clan) is distinguished from *ka kur* (clan) in that, all members of *ka jait* share a common surname or *jait* which traces back to the *lawbei Tymmen* (old ancestress). The surname may have been derived from her first name, or something connected with her, or a place to which she migrated.

Though descendants claim a common origin in *ka lawbei Tymmen*, the degree of kinship is not traceable, and blood relationship is mostly fictive. Members of *ka jait* may have been scattered throughout the Khasi Hills. Sometimes degree of kinship is reckoned to be close if members of a *jait* come from the same village. Interestingly, whenever Khasis meet as strangers, they will invariably enquire about the *jait* or surname of each other. If they happen to be in the same *jait*, further questioning will reveal if they are close kin.

*Ka kur* (clan) constitutes the macro-family structure binding the different *jait*, *kpoh* and *ling* into a social family. There are three types of *kur* formation:

- (a) Members trace descent to a first ancestress or founding mother, *Ka lawbei Tynrai* (literally, "root" ancestress).
- (b) Members may not share a common *lawbei Tynrai*, but by the process of *kur*-binding (*iateh kur*) in the olden days, some *jait* (sub-clans) are bound by covenants to be in one *kur*, though they have different *jait* and different origin.
- (c) Woman brought from outside e.g. from the plains, became integrated into Khasi society by establishing new clans, usually called by names derived by their first names and suffixed with the word *Dkhar* (plainsman/woman), with the 'D' deleted, e.g. *Dkhar & Rani* = *Kharrani*.

Blood relationship at the *kur* level is fictive; hence kinship is not traceable. However, clan exogamy is strictly observed by all members, whatever be their *jait* or degree of kinship. *Ka bynsieh ka byrnaang* (pollution) and *ka sangiap ka sangim* (incest of the worst kind) are terms referring to incestuous relationship if members of the same *kur* marry. This emphasises the concept of the *kur* as a larger family. The idea of incest could have dated back to a far past when the *kur* was small, and members were kinsmen with real blood ties. However, all the core symbols of clan unity and the *kur* as a macro family structure remain. They are the clan *cromlech* (*Mawbah, Peppah, Mawiam*), a supposedly common *lawbei Tynrai*, a common *Thawlang* (the primordial progenitor, husband of *ka lawbei*), a common *Suidria* (the primordial maternal uncle) who established the religion of the clan, a common



*Lei lang kur Leilangkha* (god/goddess of the *kur* and *kha* = i.e. maternal and paternal sides), a common land (*Ri-kur*), a clan council (*Durbar kur*), and clan elders (*Rangbah kur*) and so on. Symbolic kinship terms for clansmen/women such as *Ma*, *Meisan*, *Meibah* and *Meirad* are sometimes used even when kinship is fictive. Another aspect of the *kur* in Khasi matriliney is its embodiment in Khasi religion, as *ka niam tip kur tipkha* (a religion that knows its maternal and paternal kin). In other words, the concept of *kur* is so ingrained in the Khasi mind, that it has been elevated to the level of the sacred, a part and parcel of Khasi religious philosophy. "The Khasi religion, to some extent, is a formalization and encoding, in religions terms, of the kinship code, and of the family and social structures. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

At the highest level, there is the Khasi concept of a "universal" family of *ki khun Khasi khara* (children of the Khasi). The folktale of *ka Jingkieng Ksiar* (The Golden Bridge) which linked the heaven and the earth, when distinctions between gods and men were blurred, recalls the days of *ki aiom ksiar* (golden seasons/times). The Khasi 'universal' family of *ki Hynniewtrap Hynniewskum* (seven huts and seven nests) comprises all Khasis who trace their origin to the heavenly abodes. At this level divine origin is the source of life, and not an ancestral womb. However, the concept of "family" oneness is borne out by expressions like *para khasi khara* (fellow Khasis) *paradoh para anam* (of the same flesh and blood) or *ki khun ki ksiew u Hynniewtrep* (children and grandchildren of the seven huts). This macro "family" functions at the societal level, where the "family" is the whole society or community of fellow Khasis and *Pnars*. This is the ultimate binding force of the whole tribe.

The hierarchical structures of "family" strengthen the sense of unity and oneness, tracing common descent at different levels. Khasi family<sup>5</sup> structures have provided the in-built mechanisms for social cohesion, solidarity, peaceful co-existence, economic welfare and prosperity, and ultimately, for survival. The importance of the concept of family and the kinship code can be gauged from the fact that it has become a creed in the Khasi religion as *ka niam tipkur tipkha*.

### Changes in the Khasi Family Structures and Functions

Nakane and Gough are some of the writers who have pointed out the structural weakness in matriliney. The term "matrilineal puzzle" refers to the inherent conflicts in matriliney. Nakane states that "the complexity of the matrilineal system is a decided handicap when it comes to resisting radical economic changes. This may be one of the reasons for the rapid disintegration or instability of social organisation of matrilineal peoples in the world."<sup>8</sup> Gough's observation is in the same strain "matrilineal groups seem to be badly hit as soon as their members enter the market system. Although they may not disintegrate altogether for many decades, they are likely to break down to their minimal segments . . . . Patrilineal descent groups seem better able to weather the early changes."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Poewe believes that "The contradiction between the increasingly social nature of the forces of production and the still private character of appropriation creates the material conditions for the disappearance of the system."<sup>10</sup> Khasi society too is in the process of transition from the agrarian subsistence economy to a market economy. As such it is bound to be susceptible to social changes. Besides economic reasons, many scholars have noted that in matrilineal societies there are basic structural contradictions such as:

1. The tension between the individual (nuclear) family and the matrilineal descent groups (e.g. *Iing*, *kpoh* in the Khasi context).
2. The conflict between a man's loyalties to his wife and children and his loyalties to his own matrikin. This conflict of natal and conjugal loyalties also applies to the woman (especially the *khaddub*).
3. The conflict between marriage and sibling cohesion.
4. The conflict between ownership and authority e.g., land and property are in the names of female members, but authority is with the males. Again the *khaddub* symbolically "keeps" the religion (*ka bat ia ka niam*), but *kni Rangbah* performs the rites.
5. The conflict between matrilocal residence and a man's lack of complete authority over his own conjugal family.

6. The conflict between productive individualism and communal distribution.
7. The conflict between two sets of heirs (a man's children, and his neices/nephews).

Poewe states, "Even at the best of times, matriliney embraces contrary sets of values."<sup>11</sup> Matriliney as a system is ridden with structural contradictions. Khasi matriliney too has been put under tremendous strain by rapid change in all spheres of life as outlined earlier. This has the inevitable effect on the family structures, especially the extended family or *Iing*, which is an integral part of the Khasi matrilineal system. The *Iing* as a corporate descent group is increasingly non-functional. The *Iing* as a family has to a large extent disintegrated or at the point of disintegration.

Many Khasis have migrated to cities in search of education, jobs or a better way of life. In many villages, those who are left behind are only the old, the uneducated and the handicapped. The result of urbanisation and migration is that members of the *Iing* are scattered everywhere, not only to the four corners of the state, but outside too. Hence, the functions of the *Iing* as a family unit are no longer feasible nor practicable. The controlling authority vested on the maternal uncles (*kni*) has become ineffective. In many cases, the neices and nephews do not even see their uncles, except at some important family gatherings.

Changes in patterns of residence from matrilineal to neolocal have created a new phenomenon of independent households or elementary family units, where the father and mother, bear the sole responsibilities for their offsprings.

Education and new occupations, especially 'white' and 'blue' collar jobs, have created a new elites and new socio-economic classes in what was an egalitarian society. This has an effect on the *Iing* as divisions based on economic and social standing have put members of the *Iing* apart.

The change from subsistence economy to market economy has led to privatisation of resources. Individualism and privatisation have made people more self-centred, hence the function of the *Iing* as welfare unit, with common appropriation of resources, has become nominal. The influence of modern-day materialism and consumerism has considerably weakened

the give-and-take relationship of members within the *Iing*. Accumulation of wealth, rather than distribution to needy kith and kin, is now the order of the day. Conflicts between the controlling *kni*, the *khaddub* as custodian, (but increasingly like an "inheritor"), other siblings and members of the matrikin, are vouched by numerous court cases and litigations. Conflicts may also arise between a *Iing Khaddub* and a *Iing kbun* (i.e., the natal and conjugal families) in appropriating a man's earning or possessions. As Schneider has rightly observed, "An increase in conjugal family solidarity and loyalty is likely to be at the expense of the economic solidarity of matrilineal ties."<sup>12</sup>

New religions or the lack of any religion in non-believers, have rendered, the practices of household religions ineffective which have been the binding force of the *Iing*, the *kpob* as well as the *kur*. The *Iing-Seng* or *Iing-Khaddub* as a family sanctuary (*Iing-Niam*) binding the *Iing*, *kpob* and *kur* together, is either nominal or non-existent. This is especially true for the urbanised Khasis, for whom the ancestral home is far away in remote villages. Secondly, very few Khasis (even those who practise *Ka Niam Khasi*) observe all rituals, especially those related to sacrifices. The practice of bone internments in the *Mawshyieng*, or *Mawbah* is observed by fewer still, partly because of the huge expenses incurred and partly due to various other reasons. The expression *Ngi La sab khynnab* (we are left as children) sums up the inability to continue the old practices.

The influx of partilineal societies, and inter-religious marriage have greatly weakened the Khasi concept of family, especially the matrilineal descent groups of the *Iing* and the *kpob*. Cross-cultural influence of partilineal societies tend to orient the present generation to the conjugal, nuclear family rather than to the *Iing*. Processes of modernization in a transitional society and resultant changes in all spheres of life bring with them the added strain on matrilineal descent groups.

The changes and disintegration of matriliny have inevitable repercussion which results in the following:

The nuclear or elementary family has emerged as a more important family unit in terms of residence, economic co-operation, socialisation, responsibility, welfare and moral

well-being. In fact, *Ing* as usually applied in the modern days, especially in urban areas, is the elementary family termed *Ing-mnat* in this paper. There is also a trend for strengthening the conjugal family's solidarity.

There is decline in avuncular authority though the emergence of paternal authority is still an unusual concept among the Khasis, since women take on important authoritative roles and are usually involved in all decision making processes. The position, status and locus of authority of Khasi men are shifting from the natal to the conjugal home, and they are becoming more *kpa* than *kni*. Except in the case of a *khaddub* of a family owning a house, residence in most cases tends to be neolocal. This is especially true in urban areas. There is a decisive weakening of ties among members of a descent group. The term '*ki kur ja kur dob*' (clansmen only during special occasions) distances relatives from the same *kur*. The growth in numbers as well as other factors have made clansmen almost like strangers. Socialization is no longer restricted to cognates (*kur*) but includes agnates (*kba*). There are trends for changes in kinship terms especially in urban, educated settings, e.g. *Mai* (mother) refers to the grandmother, *Mi* (a contraction of Mummy) refers to a mother.

## Conclusion

The *Ing* as a family structure has disintegrated or is in the process of disintegration. It follows that the functions of the *Ing* are no longer operable. It also logically follows that the next higher structure, i.e., the *kpoh*, has also disintegrated to a large extent. Khasi matriliney in this sense is similar to the fourteen disintegrating matrilineal societies examined by Gough, such as the Tongs, Ndembu, Bemba, Ashanti, Hopi, Minangkabau and so on.<sup>13</sup> As Gough has rightly pointed, variations may exist in the steps, in the process, and in the degree of change; however, the end results are the same.

It has been stated at the beginning that the amount of a society's permeability and its susceptibility to change depends on several factors. As a matriliney society, Khasi matriliney has weak structural foundations which became shaky when confronted by rapid socio-economic changes. As a traditional

society moving towards modernisation, the Khasi society is being reshaped by those changes. The fluid and fluctuating nature of such a society has in turn weakened the foundations of the Khasi family structures at all levels, especially the *Iing* and the *kpob*. The disintegration of the *Iing*, consequently of the *kpob* and *kur* as strong forces of social cohesion, negates the sense of solidarity and oneness, and the tie of social cohesion. Pressures for changes from inside are in the process. For example, some organisations and individuals are questioning the validity of the matrilineal system in the present time. Only time will tell whether the whole system of matriliny will give way to inevitable changes.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Henceforth, the term 'Khasi' will be used as inclusive of the *Khyrien*, *Pnar*, *Bboi* and *War* sub-groups. Slight dialectal and cultural variations may exist, but the basic matrilineal features are the same.
2. For want of a term, the word has been coined, in order to distinguish the elementary or nuclear family from the smaller extended family which is at the next higher level. In common usage both the elementary and the extended family are called *Iing* family, home or house. In the literature the word 'household' has been used to refer to this small family unit which includes the affines as well.
3. Nakane, Chie, *Garo and Khasi, A comparative study in Matrilineal Systems*, Mouton & Co., Paris. 1967.
4. Gurdon, P.R.T., *The Khasis*, Cosmos Publication, New Delhi. 1975 (First Published in 1907).
5. Pakyntein, V., "The Khasi Clan: Changing Religion and its Effect" in Bhandari J.S., (ed.) *Kinship and Family in North-East India*. Cosmos Publication, New Delhi, 1996.
6. Nongbri, T., "Problems of Matriliny: A short Review of the Khasi kinship structure", in Bhandari, J.S. (ed.), Vol. II, Cosmos Publication, New Delhi, 1996.
7. War, J., "Status of Women in Traditional Khasi Culture", in Sen, S. (ed.). *Women in Meghalaya*, Daya Publishing House, Delhi, 1992, p. 20.
8. Nakane, Chie, op. cit. p. 43.
9. Gough, K., "Modern Disintegration of Matrilineal Disintegration of Matrilineal Descent groups", in *Matrilineal; Kinship*, D.M. Schneider and K. Gough (ed.), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1961. p. 649.
10. Poewe, L.O., *Matrilineal Ideology, Male-Female Dynamics in Luapala, Zambia*, Academic Press, London, 1981. p. 120.
11. Ibid p. 119.
12. Schneider D.M. (ed.). Ibid. p. 16.
13. Gough, K., loc. cit.

Other books on North-East India

**Women in Naga Society/ Dr. Lucy Zehol (Ed.)**

1998/ 81-86030-61-1/ 112 pages/ Rs. 175.00

**Nationalism Regionalism and Philosophy of National Integration/ N. Malla (Ed.)**

1998/ 81-86030-74-3/ 222 pages/ Rs. 350.00

**The Khasis under British Rule (1824–1947)/ Helen Giri**

1998/ 81-86030-67-0/ 314 pages/ Rs. 480.00

**Urbanization in India—Challenges and Opportunities/**

*R.P. Misra*

1998/ 81-86030-66-2/ 114 pages/ Rs. 150.00

**Trends in Social Sciences and Humanities in North East India (1947–97)/ J.P. Singh, R. Gopalakrishnan,**

*L.S. Gassah, D.R. Syiemlieh and C.J. Thomas (Eds.)*

1998/ 81-86030-79-4/ 164 pages/ Rs. 250.00

**Emerging Trends in Indian Polity/ M.V. Pylee**

1998/ 81-86030-75-1/ 62 pages/ Rs. 100.00

**India and North East India/ Sajal Nag**

1998/ 81-86030-76-X/ 132 pages/ Rs. 200.00

**Traditional Institutions of Meghalaya—A Case Study of**

*Doloi and his Administration/ Dr. L.S. Gassah*

1998/ 81-86030-49-2/ 84 pages/ Rs. 150.00

**Power to People in Meghalaya—Sixth Schedule and the**

*73rd Amendment/ M.N. Karna, L.S. Gassah and*

*C.J. Thomas (Eds.)*

1998/ 81-86030-64-6/ 200 pages/ Rs. 325.00

**Ethnicity in Manipur—Experiences, Issues and**

*Perspectives/ Dr. (Mrs.) Lucy Zehol*

1998/ 81-86030-51-4/ 144 pages/ Rs. 225.00

**Sustainable Human Development in the North-Eastern Region of India/ J.B. Ganguly**

1996/ 81-86030-29-8/ 108 pages/ Rs. 125.00

---

**Regency Publications**

**Regd. Office:** 20/36-G, Old Market, West Patel Nagar, New Delhi 110 008

Phones: 5248 4101, 5546 2898 • *Telefax:* 2588 4571

**Sales Showroom:** 4772/23, Bharat Ram Road, Darya Ganj, New Delhi-2

Phones: 2325 1405



**E-mail:** [info@regency-books.com](mailto:info@regency-books.com) • **Website:** [www.regency-books.com](http://www.regency-books.com)