

Matriliny without Matriarchy: A Descriptive Study of the Khasi Tribe of Meghalaya

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the unique matrilineal structure of the Khasi tribe in Meghalaya, India. While often celebrated as one of the few matrilineal societies in the world, Khasi society is frequently misunderstood as matriarchal. Through a descriptive analysis of family structure, gender roles, inheritance systems, religion, and social changes, this paper clarifies the distinction between matriliney and matriarchy. It draws from existing literature and cultural observations to understand the role of Khasi women and how tradition is being redefined in the face of modern pressures. The aim is to present an expanded narrative that accounts for contemporary transitions and the tension between traditional systems and modern influences.

Keywords: *Matriliny, Khasi tribe, gender roles, social changes, cultural observations*

Introduction

The Khasi tribe, one of the major ethnic communities of Meghalaya, is renowned for practicing matriliney—a system where lineage and inheritance are traced through the mother. This system sharply contrasts with the patriarchal structures found across most of India. However, Khasi society is not matriarchal, as power and public leadership are largely exercised by men. This study aims to explore the foundations of Khasi matriliney, debunk the common conflation with matriarchy, and describe how this traditional system functions in the contemporary world. It also seeks to understand the evolving roles of Khasi women and the social responses to this unique structure amid globalizing influences.

Literature Review

Scholars such as Hamlet Bareh (1997) have detailed the cultural and historical roots of Khasi matriliney, focusing on the role of the youngest daughter in preserving family property and legacy. Tiplut Nongbri (2003) highlighted the distinction between matriliney and matriarchy by pointing out women's limited access to public authority despite their centrality in kinship. A. Dutta (2020) has discussed how religious conversion, particularly to Christianity, has altered gender norms and weakened traditional roles. Reports from institutions like IGNCA have documented women's roles in the cultural economy, emphasizing the importance of craft and market participation. Additional field reports, such as those published by the North Eastern Council and anthropological surveys, note that Khasi matriliney has deep ecological and spiritual roots, linking women not only to land but to ritualistic responsibility. Collectively, the literature supports the idea that Khasi matriliney is complex, rooted in clan identity, but evolving in response to modern challenges such as education, legal reform, and economic restructuring.

Demography and Social Background of the Khasi

The Khasi are one of the three major tribes of Meghalaya, primarily concentrated in the East and West Khasi Hills. They speak the Khasi language, part of the Mon-Khmer language family, and number over one million. Historically, the Khasi region was governed through chieftainships and customary laws. Social life revolves around the matrilineal clan or "kur," with each clan tracing descent from a common ancestress. Clans are subdivided into sub-clans or "jait," and membership is determined strictly through the mother. Each clan is also traditionally associated with sacred groves, which are

important for both ecological conservation and ancestral worship. Most Khasis live in rural villages with strong community networks, though there is a rising trend of urban migration, especially to Shillong, the capital city. The Khasis follow customary laws that are passed down orally and administered by local heads known as "Syiem" in the Khasi Hills. These traditions shape community governance, marriage alliances, and land rights.

Matriliny and Family Structure

Khasi matriliney dictates that lineage, clan name, and property pass through the female line. The youngest daughter, known as Ka Khadduh, inherits the ancestral home and is responsible for caring for parents and continuing the clan line. She is not just an inheritor but a symbolic preserver of the clan. Her home is considered sacred and is often the location for ancestral rituals and decision-making. If she passes away without daughters, the inheritance shifts to the next eligible female relative within the same clan. This ensures that the property and clan name remain intact.

Men do not inherit property, but they are not entirely excluded from family influence. The maternal uncle (u kñi) plays a significant advisory role in guiding children, conducting rituals, and overseeing marriage arrangements. His opinion holds weight in family matters, even if he has no direct control over property. Marriage is exogamous, meaning individuals must marry outside their clan. Post-marriage, the husband usually moves into his wife's household (matrilocal), although in modern settings, nuclear families are becoming more common. This traditional structure reinforces women's physical presence in the ancestral home and supports their central role in maintaining continuity.

Public Life, Gender Roles, and the Question of Matriarchy

Despite matriliney, Khasi society does not empower women in public or political roles to the same degree. Governance at the village level is conducted through Dorbar Shnong (village councils), which are typically composed of male elders. Even though these councils are meant to represent the entire community, women are rarely included as members or leaders. Their voices in community matters are often indirect or mediated through male relatives. Similarly, in the larger political context of Meghalaya, while Khasi women have higher literacy and social mobility rates compared to many other tribal women in India, they remain underrepresented in formal political institutions.

Property ownership does give women economic security, but decisions regarding the use or sale of land frequently involve male clan members. This reflects a social structure where public authority is male-dominated, even though familial and ritual authority is centered around women. This dualism challenges the simplistic classification of Khasi society as matriarchal. While women may control lineage and land, the power to lead, legislate, and represent the community often lies with men.

Religion and Cultural Practices

The traditional Khasi religion, known as Niam Khasi, centers on reverence for nature, ancestral worship, and maintaining harmony with spiritual forces. Families worship at sacred groves (Law Kyntang) and conduct rituals to honor their forebears. Ritual leaders are mostly male, despite the maternal line determining family identity. Women participate actively in rituals and preparations but do not perform the rites themselves.

Festivals such as Shad Suk Mynsiem celebrate the Khasi way of life, with young men and women dancing together in traditional attire. However, the structure and execution of such festivals are controlled by male elders. Women play visible but often symbolic roles. The Seng Khasi movement, established in 1899, works to preserve these traditions against the influence of Christian missionary activity.

Christianity, which arrived during the colonial period, has become a dominant faith among the Khasis. It introduced nuclear family values, often at odds with the matrilineal structure. Many Christian Khasi families now follow patrilineal customs, at least informally. Church institutions, too, often reflect patriarchal norms, and women rarely hold leadership roles within the church. This religious dualism influences gender roles and has, in some cases, eroded matrilineal practices.

Challenges and Modern Transitions

The Khasi matrilineal system is undergoing significant transformation due to factors such as urbanization, migration, education, and exposure to external cultural values. Younger generations, particularly in urban areas, are moving away from the ancestral home and forming nuclear households. This shift reduces the influence of the extended matrilineal family and complicates traditional inheritance customs.

Additionally, economic pressures and land scarcity in urban areas have led to legal disputes and social debates over property rights. Some Khasi men feel marginalized by the traditional system and have formed organizations like Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai (SRT), which advocate for changes to include sons in inheritance. On the other hand, women's expanding roles in education, public service, and entrepreneurship are strengthening their socio-economic standing. In urban markets, many Khasi women manage stalls, small businesses, and cooperative ventures. Despite structural barriers, this economic agency provides them with growing influence.

Digital exposure and globalization are also introducing new ideas about gender equality and individualism. As a result, traditional roles are being questioned, renegotiated, and redefined. Legal recognition of customary law alongside constitutional frameworks further complicates the scenario, creating a dual legal reality for many Khasi families.

Conclusion

The Khasi tribe offers a unique but nuanced example of matriliney. While women are central to lineage, inheritance, and ritual continuity, they are not dominant in political or religious leadership. The term "matriarchy" cannot be accurately applied to Khasi society. Instead, it is a matrilineal society with complex gender dynamics that balance tradition and transformation.

Today, Khasi matriliney is at a crossroads. As societal values evolve, it must find ways to sustain cultural identity while responding to new aspirations and realities. Strengthening women's roles in public life, while respecting cultural norms, could offer a balanced path forward. The distinction between matriliney and matriarchy is critical not only for academic understanding but also for crafting inclusive policies that honor indigenous traditions without reinforcing gender inequalities.

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