

# A Literature Review on the Presence of Patriarchy in the Matrilineal Society of Meghalaya with reference to the Khasi Community

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## Abstract

The Khasi community is one of the ancient tribe that inhabit in Meghalaya and practice Matrilineality. The children adopt the mother's surname and the property and wealth are inherited by the daughter from the mother, not by the son from the father. The Khasi tribe in Meghalaya is currently going through a transitional period. The word "matrilineal," which is used to describe the lineage system that governs the whole state of Meghalaya, is one that most people tend to overuse. The husband is still the head of the family and elder men have a vital part to play in the matrilineal society. Women were never allowed to participate in a local governing institution (the *Dorbar Shnong*), banned by the Head Man. Meghalaya has seen substantial changes in the contemporary times. The traditions that have been practiced by the community are now creating some negative perceptions in the minds of the young generation. Modernization patterns are continuously presenting patrilineal standards in Khasi society. This study conducted literature review collected from various online sources available in English Language across different times. The study found that the rule of men through patriarchy in the matrilineal society of the Khasi Tribe of Meghalaya is indirectly prevalent. It also explored that the Khasis who claim to practice the matrilineal system have the only benefit that is of the lineage being traced to the mother and nothing else because all other decisions are in the hands of men. The patriarchal mindset is very much there in the Khasi society.

## Keywords

Patriarchy, Matrilineal, Meghalaya, Khasi Community

## Introduction

The state of Meghalaya in North Eastern India is the homeland of three indigenous tribal communities: the Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia who practice matrilineality by law. In contrast to patrilineal societies, matrilineal societies trace the family line through women (Roy, 2018). The children adopt the mother's surname and the property and wealth are inherited by the daughter from the mother, not by the son from the father. The Khasi tribe is the largest of these three tribal groups, accounting for nearly half of the state's overall population.

The Khasi are an ancient tribe that inhabit Meghalaya, as well as the neighboring states of Assam and Bangladesh (Illumi Naija, 2023). The Mon-Khmer people of East Asia are said to be the ancestors of the Khasis, who are migrants. The Khasi tribe still upholds the antiquated matrilineal custom in the isolated north-eastern Indian state of Meghalaya, where women inherit ancestral property, children take their mother's last name, and the neighborhood market is bustling with independent female vendors who have full control over their businesses.

The Khasi tribe in Meghalaya is currently going through a transitional period where, on the one hand, the government is trying to transform its traditional political institutions into more effective tools of democratic decentralization leading to disagreements over the "manoeuver of village-level governance" between the government and the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC), and, on the other hand, a section of Khasi men are assuming leadership roles. (Roy, 2018)

The word "matrilineal," which is used to describe the lineage system that governs the whole state of Meghalaya, is one that most people tend to overuse. However, this is untrue in the case of the Khasi community (Beth, 2018). Major decisions are always headed and made by the maternal uncle of the family. The husband is still the head of the family and elder men have a vital part to play in the matrilineal society. Thus, men have a greater overall social power than women. Even though the Khasi community is a matrilineal society, the women folk aren't as empowered as it is demonstrated. Women were never allowed to participate in a local governing institution (the *Dorbar Shnong*), banned by the Head Man, and also known as the *Rangbah Shnong*. This study explores the rule of men through patriarchy in the matrilineal society of the Khasi Tribe of Meghalaya. It also tries to focus on the factors of patriarchy in the Khasi community.

### **Material and Methods**

The researcher used the Cochrane Handbook Guidelines (Jullian Higgins, 2023). The researcher also conducted online search for literature exploring the matrilineal society of Khasi community and the position of men in the Khasi community.

The study conducted a literature review of studies published in the English Language only that reported and reviewed the matrilineal society and the presence of patriarchy in the matrilineal society of the Khasi community.

### **Traditions related to the matrilineal society of Khasi Tribe**

The study "Analysis of Gender Disparity in Meghalaya by Various Types of Composite Indices" by Sudhanshu K. Mishra, explored how women in Meghalaya perform, vis-à-vis men, in the socio-economic sphere. In a matriarchal system of social organization, the female is the real head of the family, and descent and inheritance are traced through the female line. Tracing of descent through the maternal line is a matrilineal system, which is only a subsystem within the larger framework of matrifocality/matriarchy. Headship of a family is related to hierarchy: powers of decision-making, inheritance, benefaction and betrothal, ownership of economic resources, participation in activities relating to allocation, exchange, and production, participation in socio-cultural activities, and so on. The effectiveness of headship may vary from being nominal to autocratic and dictatorial, without arousing strong feelings of disapproval and triggering off destabilizing reactions from other members of the organization. There could be various types of constraints on the decision-making powers of a head. Many of these constraints may be institutional (customs, mores, traditions, and precedents) in nature. In reality, matriarchy seldom exists, but matrifocality does (Mishra, n.d). It appears that matrifocality in Meghalaya has not crossed the boundaries of the household when we notice that among the three Members of Parliament from the state, all are men, and among sixty Members of the (7th) Legislative Assembly of the state only three are women, one from the opposition and two from the ruling party. At the level of the local self-government, a village head is a 'headman'.

The Khasis, a matrilineal tribe in Meghalaya, in the northeast of India, are the adherents of a peculiar matriline social structure. However, it is going through a period of transformation from tradition to modernity that can help to favor the status of women. With the times changing the culture of the tribes also changing along with the influence of Western education more and more people especially the males of the society, the educated males are taking advantage of education and not following their traditions and customs. They are marrying girls from different castes so that the inherited property stays with them and they do not have to give it up. Modernization patterns are continuously presenting patrilineal standards in Khasi society. Inquisitively, these inclinations have likewise offered to ascend to circumstances in which a few ladies have picked up experts in the home grown circle, yet its potential for extending sex disparity ought to likewise be considered. Consequently, it very well may be aid that powers of modernization don't advance sex uniformity (Anushka Jain, 2021).

## Rule of Men in the matrilineal society of Khasi Tribe

In the article, “Matrilineality In Meghalaya - Traditions And Current Practice” by Popy Devi Nath and Bastobee Borsaikia, it is stated that Khasi is an indigenous community of Meghalaya that is constitutionally recognized as an ethnic minority. The Khasi tribe is one of the few tribes to practice matrilineality to date. The term “matriarchy” and “matrilineal” are closely associated with the complex network of family anatomy and relationships of the Khasi society. Lineage and descent is traced through the female with the property inheritance by the youngest female remaining as the prime characteristic of the practice. While gender roles exist in both patriarchal and matrilineal societies, these appear to be more flexible, and gender relations are more egalitarian in the latter structure than in patrilineal society. In Khasi society, family descent is traced through the mother. The father is considered the head of the family only in the material and mental life of the family. The maternal uncle (u kñi) and one of the youngest daughters (ka khadduh) share complementary roles. The maternal uncle has prescribed the rules of decision-making while the youngest daughter is the sole receiver and custodian of ancestral property although the son can also be permitted a share (Popy Devi, 2021). If ‘ka khadduh’ dies without any daughter surviving her, her next elder sister inherits the ancestral property, and after her, the youngest daughter of that sister (Government of Meghalaya, n.d.). Failing all daughters and their female issues, the property goes back to the mother’s sister, the mother’s sister’s daughter, and so on (Kundu, 2023). However, some families divide their property equally among their children, irrespective of gender. Any failure in the practice of this system cannot be fully attributed to the non-matrilineal societal pressure or personal failures rather it is due to the structural constraints. Apart from this, some opinionated Khasis, local anthropologists, and sociologists also hold the common opinion that this system of inheritance is detrimental to the full development of the sons and also today's economic development of Meghalaya

In another post in The Guardian, it stated that even though the Khasi Tribe is matrilineal, men in the society don’t want to follow it. Men are not even entitled to family gatherings. The decision of the family is always headed by the male member irrespective of the matrilineal society. According to The Economic Times, some men say the matrilineal system is not working for them, and the centrality of the maternal uncle disappears. It is becoming common for people to pass on acquired property (as against inherited assets) to male children (Kothari, 2019). The problems faced by the men in these tribes are not dissimilar to what women face in the patriarchal norm elsewhere and shine a light on the centrality of inheritance in gender dynamics.

The gender insecurity among the women of the Khasi Tribe is somewhat prevalent due to its roots in India’s patriarchy. In spite of the fact that Khasi women in North-East India traditionally enjoy high autonomy through the matrilineal system, the sense of insecurity and a feared sense of identity loss living as they did amid or in close proximity to much larger and dominant populations and the adoption of a more defensive position vis-à-vis outside groups have pressured them to reinforce their traditional norms, particularly pro-natalist reproductive norms (Udoy Saikia, 2009).

## Factors of Patriarchy in the matrilineal society of the Khasi Tribe

In a post in The Shillong Times, “Matrilineal not matriarchal: Role of Khasi men in society”, it is stated that even before they had frequent contact with outsiders, the matrilineal Khasi were the first of all the mongoloid people of the North East to reach a high degree of culture. Oral traditions state that man gave up naming their offspring after themselves because they were busy with war and hunting, with little time for child-rearing. The ambiguities of war also eventually caused males to give up their entitlement to inherit property. Therefore, all the responsibilities were handed over to the women folk, which consequently increased their social status to equals of men. A Khasi man is, in a nutshell, the patriarch of his wife's family. His role as the family's primary provider, guardian of his mother, sisters, and young girls and sons, as well as the exalted defender of his mother's family, is an honorable one. Without a Khasi man, worship and religion would be considered sacrilegious. A Khasi man is 'u Ki' or maternal uncle and he is 'u Kpa' or a father. To a Khasi man, the base of his self and person in the family revolves around his own thought, his life and soul, and the lives and souls of people close to him. His position may seem rather ludicrous to foreigners (Syiemlieh, 2017). Only matrilineal

residence and material descent are practised by Khasis. Even though the mother is the source of descent, the father is the family's head (Abhipedia, n.d). While the father is the head of the family and the main earner for the family's income, the mother is the mere keeper of all earnings. While the mother nurses the children, it is the father that the children will expect to get the most advice and decision regarding the future. It is the father who is expected to be the defender of the family and the family's property. The state has had a significant influx of both legal and illegal migrants from Bangladesh and India over the past 20 years. Many Meghalayan khasi males now perceive conventional society values, norms, and rituals in a significantly different way as a result of social contact with immigrants from patriarchal societies (Roy, n.d).

## Discussion

Meghalaya, 'the abode of clouds', is known for a number of unique practices. Meghalaya remains one of the last few places in India where a matrilineal society subsists to date. A common perception that exists among people is that women in Northeast India enjoy a higher status in society than men. Although this notion is true to some extent, being a matrilineal society of Meghalaya, the Khasi community isn't aloof from India's predominate Patriarchy. The difference between matrilineal and matriarchy strikes out the women's empowering role in the community. To focus on the matter that the Khasi community of Meghalaya is only matrilineal and not matriarchy provides the men of the community a huge authority in terms of decision-making and facilitating other socio-economic factors. In many situations, women are not allowed to participate in the political sphere and the head of the village is a Man, irrespective of following matrilineality.

Men in the Khasi community have a higher authority in making decisions for the family. Only matrilineal residence and matrilineal descent are practiced by Khasis. Even though the mother is the source of descent, the father is the family's head. In recent times, Khasi men have not felt very accustomed to the belief system of their lineage. They believe that the property and assets should also be given to the male child of the family. Meghalaya has seen substantial changes in the contemporary times. The traditions that have been practiced by the community are now creating some negative perceptions in the minds of the young generation. Some of the new generation of the Khasi community is avoiding the older traditions and believes that it is hindering their community.

## Conclusion

The state of Meghalaya in north-eastern India is the homeland to three indigenous tribal communities: the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia who practice matrilineality by law. Matrilineality is a social system in which the family line, unlike patrilineal society, is traced through women. The children adopt the mother's surname and the property and wealth are inherited by the daughter from the mother, not by the son from the father. The fundamental point of matrilineality is that lineage comes from the mother's clan. The strength of matrilineality lies in the greatest respect that the society bestows on women, especially on mother and her clan. Khasi society happens to be liberal towards the women who enjoy their social space and rights at greater extent. The Khasis who claim to practice the matrilineal system have the only benefit that is of the lineage being traced to the mother and nothing else because all other decisions are in the hands of men. The patriarchal mindset is very much there in the Khasi society; women do face oppression and domestic violence as other women of the patriarchal society. The patriarchal aspects of Indian Society still exist in the matrilineal society of the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya.

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