

Empowerment of Women with Special Reference to Khasi community in Meghalaya, India

Bhola Nath Ghosh¹

Abstract

The Khasi is one of the tribes living in Meghalaya state of North-East India. This tribe draws much attention of the sociologists, because this tribe practices matrilineal system characterized in terms of marriage, inheritance of property and matrilineal post-marital residence and other social relations. This is rare in other society. The khasi society of Meghalaya is such a society, commonly known as matrilineal where authority, title, inheritance, residence after marriage and succession are traced through female line. So, it is presumed that they do not require any special effort to make them aware and get social, economic, political, psychological understanding and knowledge to establish their rights along with men in their society as they are automatically placed on an esteemed level. Matrilineal society has been a source of great pride to the state. The paper examined the dynamic roles and status of rural tribal women living in Meghalaya, especially of the Khasi women. More precisely, we tried to examine, how much control a Khasi women has over resources within and outside the family. It is empirically observed that the Khasi communities in its traditional arrangement both, men and women enjoy their restricted roles. It can be concluded that empowerment of women is evident in all its glory in Meghalaya's unique women centric society. It is observed from the survey that at present, the Khasi matrilineal is in the transition phase and its future is still not properly defined.

Introduction

Most of the states in India are patrilineal but in Meghalaya it is matrilineal. The Khasi is one of the tribes living in Meghalaya State of North-east India. This tribe draws much attention of the Sociologists especially Social Scientists, because this tribe practices matrilineal system characterized in terms of marriage, inheritance and residential status after marriage. It is commonly believed that the status of women in matrilineal society is higher compared to that of patrilineal society. This can be seen in terms of empowerment and other roles played by the women. However, it may not imply that the women are more empowered than men in Meghalaya. The Khasi society of Meghalaya is such a society, commonly known as matrilineal where female folks determine

¹ Bhola Nath Ghosh, PhD, Assistant Professor, Sociological Research Unit, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata, India.
Email: bholanathghosh@hotmail.com or bhola@isical.ac.in

authority, title, inheritance, and residence after marriage and succession. So, it is presumed that the right of the society is already established and they do not require any special effort for their rights. But the question is whether they are aware about the social, economic and other issues as compared to the awareness of male.

Therefore, a question may arise whether in Khasi Tribe the status of empowerment of women is ascribed or prescribed by the society. In Meghalaya the female, normally inherit the property and holds the keys to social and economic activities.

If we ask a question: who is a Khasi? The answer is not easy, as in the present situation, it is a difficult task to identify in the true and pure Khasi traits of culture. Material culture seems to be rapidly changing and the institution; the homes and so on can rarely be identified as pure Khasi.

Any person can claim or identify himself as a Khasi if he or she fulfils any one of the following conditions:

1. That he or she believes that his or her forefathers were the Hynniewtrep Hynniewskum (seven huts-seven clans), the first inhabitants of these hills, who resided in the house of God.
2. That he or she is born of Khasi parents.
3. That at least his or her mother is a Khasi.
4. That should a Khasi (man) marry a non-Khasi woman, his wife and their offspring become Khasis if she agrees to obey, follow and adopt all the traditional norms, religion, customs and rituals performed by the Khasi. As the Khasi is a matrilineal society, a non-Khasi mother has to become a Khasi by performing certain rights; religious sanctions have to be obtained for the new title of the clan through rituals.

Khasi society evolved with the adoption of the concept of *ka kheim-kur*, *khein-kha*, *tip-kur-tip-kha*.

The acceptance of the above kinship structures as the source gives the race its unique characteristic from time immemorial to the present day and endows the Khasi man and woman with distinct identities and well defined roles in their society.

There are certain principles, precepts and tenets which clearly define the duties and responsibilities expected of a Khasi man and a Khasi woman.

From among the numerous races which inhabit the North-Eastern corner of India we find the matriarchal system of society present only in two tribes, - the Khasis and the Garos. They live close to each other, the Garos at the extreme western end and the Khasis just east to them in the same range of hills which forms the southern boundary of the Brahmaputra valley. But the two tribes are distinct from one another. They do not speak the same language and differ in many of their laws and customs. The Khasis belong to the earliest bands of immigrants and it has been very difficult to tract their origin. Linguistically the Garos belong to the Bodo group and are closely related to the Kacharis, Rabhas, Mwech and other tribes with a patriarchal form of society, who settle

in Assam Valley. It has been said that the Garos during the course of their wandering towards Gauhati were enslaved by the Assamese, but released by a Khasi Prince, who settled them in the neighbourhood of Boko. The place was infested with tigers and demons and the Garos being afraid of complete extinction moved away from this place and ultimately settled in the place where they now inhabit.

It might have been possible, therefore, that the Garos copied the matriarchal system from the Khasis. The institutional laws as we find is more potent and active amongst the Khasis profoundly influencing their social and political life.

Difference between Patriarchal and Matriarchal Societies

The distinction between the matriarchal and patriarchal societies starts from descent. We speak of the descent as patriarchal when a child belongs to the social group of his father and as matriarchal when he/she belongs to the social group of his/her mother. The Khasis say "Khein Jaid na ka Kynthei". Descending from a common ancestress are said to belong to the same "Kur", i.e., clan. All others who do not belong to the same clan are known as "Kha." Indeed "Tip Kur Tip Kha", i.e., to know those who belong to the same clan and those who do not belong is the fundamental feature of Khasi life. It is the basis of their social structure, and governs every walk of life, their religion, belief and all social laws and customs.

Area of the study

The present study is conducted among the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya. The two villages wherein the research study has been conducted are Ringkesh and Kyton-u-mon situated under the Khasi Hill district of Nawlyngknang block.

The capital of Meghalaya, Shillong lies on the eastern part of the state. Between the two villages chosen, Ringkesh lies near to Shillong and Kyton-u-mon is few kilometers away from the capital. Both the villages are poor in nature.

Methodology of the Study and Data

Process of matrilineity of the Khasi society here has been studied through primary survey in two villages from East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya. These villages are Ringkesh and Kyton-u-mon under Mawlyngknang block. The villages are chosen purposively on consideration of conveniences, such as access and communication, security, expenditure involved in survey etc. However most of the features of the rural Meghalaya have much in common in the aforesaid selected villages.

There are 257 households (119+138) in all in those selected villages. The ratio of male and female-headed families in the selected villages was found to be 1.6: 1 in Meghalaya. Though the society of Meghalaya is commonly known as matrilineal, more than two third of the families are run by males and only around 1/3rd are headed by females. Then question naturally arises whether the society of Meghalaya is gradually approaching towards patrilineal or the dominance of female still has been prevailing in the same manner and the change has been just for the convenience without any major change in balance of gender distribution in any respect.

We have stratified the families according to the characteristics of sex of family head, caste, occupation, education etc. and finally chosen 95 households; 37 out of 175 male-headed households and 58 from 82 female headed households. Data have been collected, from the finally chosen households, on different aspects like family size, sex, education, caste, occupation, income and expenditure, mode of expenditure and also on their attitude/opinion towards social, political, cultural aspects i.e. on social, cultural, economical, political, religious and psychological aspects of the heads as well as other members of the families. From that information we tried to understand the process of empowerment by analysing the data. The study is mainly descriptive and exploratory.

Basic Characteristics of Sample Households:

From the table-1 we observe that out of 37 male headed households about 68 per cent of the heads are in the below 50 age group and over 43 percent are in the below 40 age group. Whereas among the female headed households about 36 per cent of the heads are in the below 50 and around 20 per cent are in the age group of 20 to 40. On the other hand, around 22 per cent of male heads are in the above 50 age group and about 64 per cent of the female heads are in the similar age group.

Table-1: Age-wise Sex Composition of the Sample Households

Sex of Head	20-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	>70	Total
Male	4 (10.8)	12 (32.4)	9 (24.3)	6 (16.2)	4 (10.8)	2 (5.4)	37
Female	3 (5.2)	9 (15.5)	9 (15.5)	14 (24.1)	17 (29.3)	6 (10.3)	58
Total	7 (7.37)	21 (22.11)	18 (18.95)	20 (21.05)	21 (22.11)	8 (8.42)	95

Source: Field Survey. Significance level of the Chi-square test: 0.003².

Note: Figures in the parentheses represent percentage to total of the respective sex.

Table-2: Distribution of Families by Family Size across different Educational Categories of the Head of the Household

Sex of Head	Education	1-5	6-10	> 10	Total
Male Headed	Illiterate	1	6	0	7 (18.9)
	< M.P.	9	7	2	18 (48.7)
	≥ M.P.	7	5	0	12 (32.4)
	Sub-Total	17	18	2	37 (100)
Female Headed	Illiterate	12	6	0	18 (31.0)
	< M.P.	18	12	1	31 (53.5)
	≥ M.P.	5	4	0	9 (15.5)
	Sub-Total	35	22	1	58 (100)
Grand Total		52	40	2	95

Source: Field Survey.

Significance level of the Chi-square test taking ‘1-5’ and ‘6 or more’ as the categories of family size and ‘<MP’ and ‘≥ MP’ as the categories of education level: Sex of head Vs. Family size: 0.122, Sex of head Vs. Educational level: 0.047 and Family size Vs. Educational level: 0.501.

² Results of the Chi-square test to see if sex and age are independent: The sig. value is .003 (one sided). This was found after converting the table into a 2×2 contingency table as follows.

Table-2 reveals that among male headed households the percentage of families with family size 5 or less is almost same as that of family size more than 5, whereas among female headed households the percentage of families with family size less than 6 (about 60 per cent) is much higher than the percentage of families having size 6 or more (around 40 per cent). Almost at every educational level especially in the illiterate category, female heads are having a tendency to keep family size lower than the male heads.

Sex of Head\Age	20-50	51 or more
Male	25	12
Female	21	37

Only the significance value of Fisher's exact (one sided) test is reported here. If the value is less than 0.05 then the two variables are not independent, i.e., they are related. The same procedure is taken in all other tables.

Table-3: Distribution of Households According to Marital Status of the Head

Sex of Head	Unmarried	Widow	Divorced/ Separated	Married once	Married more than once	Total
Male	3 (8.1)	2 (5.4)	0 (00)	27 (73.0)	5 (13.5)	37
Female	1 (1.7)	18 (31.3)	7+4 (19.0)	26 (44.8)	2 (3.4)	58

Source: Field Survey, Significance level of the Chi-square test: 0.006.

Note: Figures in the parentheses represent percentage to total of the respective sex

From table-3 it is observed that about 50 per cent of the female heads are due to automatic choice as they are either widow, divorced or separated and hence there is no chance of male to be head. Around 48 per cent of female heads are married and barely 2 per cent are unmarried. But in case of male heads, around 86 per cent are married (once or more than once) and about 8 per cent are unmarried.

Table-4: Distribution of Household by Earning Status of the Head of Families of Different Age-Group

	Age	Dependent	Earner
Male	20-40	1 (6.2)	15 (93.8)
	41-60	1 (66.7)	14 (93.3)
	> 60	1 (16.7)	5 (83.3)
	Sub-Total	3 (8.1)	34 (91.9)
Female	20-40	4 (33.3)	8 (66.7)
	41-60	2 (8.7)	21 (91.3)
	> 60	6 (26.0)	17 (74.0)
	Sub-Total	12 (20.7)	46 (79.3)
	Grand Total	15 (15.79)	80 (84.21)

Source: Field Survey,

Note: Figures in the parentheses represent percentage to total of the respective sex Significance level of the Chi-square test (Sex of Head Vs. Dependent/Earner): 0.085

If we look at the case of inheritance of property the traditional custom is to inherit ancestral assets primarily to the females especially the youngest daughter of the family. However the other daughters of the family also get the

share of the ancestral property informally but not equal with that of youngest one and the settlement is done with the consent of the daughters' maternal uncle. The data reveals that about relatively very less male heads (about 35 per cent) have received share of ancestral property i.e., about 65 per cent of male heads do not inherit any property. The male heads who inherited property are either with no sisters or received through will from parents.

Table-5: Distribution of Heads According to the Inheritance of Ancestral Property

Sex	Property Inherited	Not Inherited
Male Head	13 (35.14)	24 (64.86)
Female Head	29 (50.00)	29 (50.00)

Source: Field survey, Significance level of the Chi-square test: 0.113.

Note: Figures in the parentheses represents percentage to total.

The table-6 shows that monthly average per capita family income in case of female headed household is much lower than that of male headed household. Also average per capita expenditure on food, education, travel and other purposes (entertainment, drink, dress etc) are comparatively higher in case of male headed household than that of female headed household. Only in case of health care and electricity, female-headed household spends more than a male headed household. But the coefficient of variation in income and expenditures across families are much higher in case female headed household than that of male headed household. This is because many of female heads are either widow, deserted or separated with small children and hence have very poor income to spend. This indicates the disadvantageous condition of the rural females in spite of being known as matrilineal society.

The youngest daughter known as the “Khadduh” inherits the ancestral house and property and the other sisters especially after marriage are given only a share sufficient to maintain themselves. The youngest daughter is not, however, the full heir but in most cases she is only the custodian of the family property. The actual management is in the hands of her eldest maternal uncle or brothers and ancestral property cannot be sold without the knowledge and consent of the uncles and brothers.

Table-6: Percentage of Family under Below Poverty Line across the Sex of Heads

Sex of the Head	BPL	APL
Male	3 (8.1)	34 (91.9)
Female	14 (24.1)	44 (75.9)
Total	17 (17.9)	78 (82.1)

Source: Field survey, Significance level of the Chi-square test: 0.040.

Note: Figures in the parentheses represents percentage to total.

From table-6 we observe that incidence of poverty is relatively more in case female headed household than that of male headed household. Also the occupational status of the heads, which yields people some position in the family and society, is shown in the table-7.

Table-7: Occupational Pattern of the Heads across Sexes and Education

Sex	Educational Qualification	Cultivator	Agri-Labourer	Govt. Service	Pvt. Service	Business	House wife	Old Age	Other
Male	Illiterate	0	4	0	2	0	0	1	0
	< Madhyamic	4	7	1	3	2	0	0	1
	> Madhyamic	0	2	6	1	2	0	0	1
	Sub-total	4 (10.8)	13 (35.1)	7 (18.9)	6 (16.2)	4 (10.8)	0 (00)	1 (2.7)	2 (5.4)
Female	Illiterate	1	7	0	0	2	2	4	2
	< Madhyamic	2	6	1	2	8	3	4	5
	> Madhyamic	0	0	4	1	3	0	0	1
	Sub-total	3 (5.2)	13 (22.4)	5 (8.6)	3 (5.2)	13 (22.4)	5 (8.6)	8(13.8)	7(12.1)

Source: Same as Table-1,

Significance level of the Chi-square test of Sex of Head Vs. Occupation (with categories 'Cultivator or Agri. Labourer' and 'Others'): 0.054.

From the table-7 it is clear that because of lower educational background female heads are comparatively less in government and private services but they are more in business (here actually petty businesses). Earlier women were also predominant in agriculture. But now-a-days men are increasingly participating in agriculture as cultivator or agricultural labourer. On the whole, females are relatively in lower level occupation than their counterpart men in our study area.

In the society if women can work and participate in different social and entertaining activities freely their position improves than if they cannot. In the backward traditional societies, normally women do not become even member of any such social organisation. In rural areas of Meghalaya also we find very few women especially the well educated one are member of similar organisation compared to men as shown in table-8.

Table-8: Sex-wise Distribution of Head According to Membership of Club, Community Centre, Social Organisation or NGO

Sex	Member	Non-Member	Total
Male	12 (32.43)	25 (67.57)	37 (100)
Female	2 (3.45)	56 (96.55)	58 (100)

Source: Same as Table-1, Significance level of the Chi-square test: 0.000.

Table-9: Education-wise Distribution of Female Heads according to Participation in Meeting/Function/Fete etc. outside the Village

Education	Participation in Social Meeting, Social Gathering, Function etc			Total
	Alone	With men/women of the same or other family	Others	
Illiterate	17 (94.4)	1 (5.6)	0 (0.0)	18 (100)
< Madhyamic	23 (74.2)	6 (19.4)	2 (6.5)	31 (100)
> Madhyamic	9 (100)	0	0	9 (100)
Total	49 (84.5)	7 (12.1)	3 (3.4)	58 (100)

Source: Same as Table-1, Significance level of the Chi-square test Education Vs. Participation (Alone and not alone): 0.193.

Though most of the females are not the member of different social organisations or clubs, they can move alone freely and join any party, function or ceremony and mostly without the permission of senior or male members. The tendency is more for the more and more educated females and also with the increase in age (table-9 and 10). Therefore education makes the female to think independently and act without any fear even in the villages of Meghalaya.

Table-10: Age-wise Distribution of Female Heads Visit nearest Town With/Without the Permission of Men

Age	Yes	No	Total
20-40	15 (83.3)	3 (16.7)	18
41-60	28 (90.3)	3 (9.7)	31
> 60	8 (89.0)	1 (11.0)	9

Source: Same as Table-1, Significance level of the Chi-square test: 0.373.

Political Status

Though females in Meghalaya are much aware about their rights and position in the society, but there are hardly any women actively participating in politics. Even the society does not allow women to participate in political decision making. Till now any woman Headman of a *Dorbar* is hardly found. Also they do not participate much into political discourses. Only recently women are allowed on a very limited scale to participate in *Dorbar* meeting. Though women in Khasi society are relatively free, still there are discriminations (social and psychological) as explained above, yet the women do not seem to be much interested in politics. Actually most of the rural women think even reservation of seat for the females in the local bodies or *Dorbar* is not beneficial to them. The opinion of both male and female heads in this regard is presented in table-11. Even some of the females do not bother about whether their name is in the electoral role or not. Of course most of the females exercise their franchise in the election and that percentage increases with the rise in educational level of the rural females as is observed from the following Tables.

Table-11: Sex-wise Distribution of Heads according to the Opinion about Reservation of Seats for Members in the Local Bodies (Gram Panchayat/ Dorbar)

Sex	Very Bad	Bad	Not so Bad	Good	Very Good	No Idea	Total
Male	22 (59.5)	4 (10.8)	5 (13.5)	1 (2.7)	0 (0)	5 (13.5)	37
Female	35 (60.3)	11 (19.0)	2 (3.4)	2 (3.4)	0 (0)	8 (13.8)	58

Source: Field survey,

Note: Figures in the parentheses represents percentage to total.

Significance level of the Chi-square test of Sex of Head Vs. Opinion (Bad or not bad): 0.223.

Table-12: Education and Sex-wise Distribution of Households According to Inclusion and Exclusion of Head in the Voting List and Exercising Voting Right

Sex of Head	Educational Qualification	Name included in the Voting List		Exercise Voting Power	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
Male	Illiterate	5	2	5	2
	< Madhyamic	16	2	16	2
	> Madhyamic	11	1	11	1
	Sub-total	32	5	32	5
Female	Illiterate	14	4	14	4
	< Madhyamic	29	2	29	2
	> Madhyamic	8	1	8	1
	Sub-total	51	7	51	7

Source: Field survey, Significance level of the Chi-square test of Sex of head Vs. Vote: 0.536.

Observation

Development of the law on property

The fundamental precepts have largely influenced the customary laws of the Khasis on the use, application, transfer and alienation of property and wealth among Khasis.

Analysing from both angles of ascription vis-à-vis achievement of women in Khasi matriliney we found that

- (i) The rule of matrilineal descent is intact without any structural change
- (ii) domestic decision of women is restrictive, male members have an upper hand
- (iii) Religious authority within indigenous faith or having changed to other religion, women enjoys no authority
- (iv) Inheritance and management of ancestral property is restrictive to women. While self acquired property is subjected to the earner's authority
- (v) Traditionally Political belief does not permit women as active participants while they are in position of authority in rational legal institutions, and
- (vi) Matriliney and gender (both male and female) restricts the role and authority of both. The restrictive structure to build within the matrilineal framework is gearing towards a gender debate in the society at large.

In the Political and Administrative sphere, women do not have any right. Disputes are settled primarily in the villages by the village councils composed of a Sirdar and four or five headmen elected by only the male members of the village. If there is dissatisfaction the dispute is then tried by a council of a 'Raid', an area comprising of different villages. The members of the council are elected from certain clans. Ultimately the dispute is tried by the Siem and his Myntris. The Siem is the head of the State. It may be noted that women are not only debarred from being members of these councils but do not even have the right to elect the members. The office of the Siem cannot also be held by a woman, but descent is always through the female line. And yet, when it comes to giving women a role in politics, Meghalaya seems to be reluctant.

Although Khasis are religiously following the matrilineal society, in the upper of civil administration as well as in the 60- member Meghalaya assembly, participation of women is very less. At the time of data collection there were only three women legislators -- Debora C Marak, Maysalin War and RosanWarjri. None of the stalwarts of Meghalaya politics have an answer to this.

Conclusion

This contentious issue has come into the public domain when a section of Khasi intellectuals, led by Mr Michael Syiem, Convener of Maitshaprang Movement, asserted that Khasi men were not engaging themselves much in economic activities because of the matrilineal nature of the society.

More than fifty per cent of the women surveyed said that they were not interested in electoral politics. Almost all villagers said "Basically, women think that politics is not their cup of tea". Although society in Meghalaya is theoretically matriarchal, in practice men have all the economic power and therefore men have the ability to control politics. Since women do not have economic power, they lack confidence to step into politics. Even now, the village councils or *dorbars* do not have women in decision-making positions. Another factor that prevents women from coming forward and demanding political space is that they are not groomed to take part in public discourses as a matter of tradition. It is observed that no bank provides any financial assistance to any male Khasi entrepreneur because they cannot pledge any immovable property. This is a major practical problem which our society wants to gloss over.

Only a few Khasi people are interested to change the laws in terms of property inheritance. But change of inheritance law means change of social structure, which majority of Khasis do not like. A similar attempt to change the law was made by the Khasi Students Union (KSU) in the eighties but it was given up as the traditional Khasi society did not show enthusiastic response. The society is divided on the issue as those seeking change had been finding it difficult to come out of the shadow of tradition.

The results of household survey made during 2009-2010 reveal that the women still enjoy the accession to inheritance, and control over the resources. However the situation is changing very fast. Though the role of Khasi women seems to have been prescribed, but most of the activities of women are becoming ascribed. Though Meghalaya is known as the matrilineal society, now many of the families are headed by the males. The tendency is increasing with the increasing involvement of male in the socio-economic activities, expansion of education, emergence of nuclear families etc.

However in the family there is no discrimination among the male and female child. This is partly because of the economic independence of the females and their customary laws, which is still dominant in the rural areas.

Though traditionally the women (especially the youngest one) are supposed to inherit ancestral property, men also inherit property under different circumstances.

Though earlier females used to dominate in the field of various economic activities now-a-days males also are involved in different activities. Relatively more females are illiterate than males. Data reveal that, now the high collar jobs are mostly occupied by the males and the income of the female headed households are relatively less and associated with significant inter-family variation. Also incidence of poverty is more in case of female headed household. Yet the female better manage the family and give more emphasis on the human development indicators like education, health etc.

We apparently observe that some changes among the people of this community and now the women are no longer the sole inheritor of their ancestral property. Now men are also controlling the property. To some extent through the major economic and non-economic activities are guided by the decision of their counter-parts.

At present, however private ownership of property has acquired greater importance over the old ideas of joint ownership and the desire to live in harmony amongst all members of the clan seems to have yielded slowly to the notion of economic domination through the ownership of private property. It is therefore likely that the law especially with regard to property will gradually change.

It is observed empirically that the Khasi community in its traditional arrangement, neither male nor female has absolute authority. Both enjoy their restricted roles. Therefore at present, the Khasi matriliney is in the transition phase and its future is still not properly defined.

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