

Khasi-Pnar matriliney: Reclaiming lost spaces
Patricia Mukhim

Understanding matriliney in Khasi society:

The underlying concept of matriliney which is practised among the nearly one million Khasi people is that descent and lineage is from the mother's clan line and ancestral property passes through the youngest daughter who is the custodian of ancestral property. The Khasi-Pnar society exists amidst a strong patriarchal 'Indian' society. Yet matriliney has been able to survive the storms and stresses that threaten to disrupt it at particular junctures in history and to come out stronger after the challenges. The inherent strength of matriliney lies in the respect and responsibility that society places on women especially in the clan mother (Ka Iawbei). The clan (kur) is a strong foundation upon which Khasi society rests. At the head of the clan is the maternal uncle (Mama) who decides the political and social interests of the clan. But he too draws his strength from his own matri-kin or relatives from the mother's side.

Whereas in Indian society, marriages are arranged and the woman's family must pay 'dowry' to the prospective groom and his family and women are tortured and harassed when they and their families do not pay the price demanded by the groom's family, the Khasi society is very liberal when it comes to women enjoying their social space and their rights. The state as a patriarchal entity often looks at things from a restrictive point of view. Hence the population growth among Khasis is attributed to lack of knowledge about reproductive rights. But that is not how the Khasis see things. Culturally we are told that children are a blessing from the creator and nurturer. The more children the richer the clan. The more girls the better for society. They see the need to have as many children as they possibly can to ensure that what he does not gVery often the state women in t If women in this cosociety rights . Women can enter into matrimony with whosoever they choose to except with members of the same clan and immediate members of the father's kin. In Khasi society, when a man marries the youngest daughter he moves to her place and continues to live there with his in laws.

Esther Syiem a professor of English in the North Eastern Hill University, Meghalaya, India says Khasi women became custodians of their race when men had to go to war more often than they could stay at home ('Khasi Matrilineal Society – The Paradox Within' in *The Peripheral Centre, Voices from India's North East*, edited by Preeti Gill). Citing oral history Syiem says life had become precarious for men so they decided to make women the keepers of the family name and subsequently of society's values. They entrusted the family name to women who would not only be caretakers but also guard the family inheritance and culture.

Syiem interrogates Khasi society further and speaks of a more complex bestowal upon women which ultimately reflects upon a society that sees women as the upholder of a worldview, as the custodians of their race. The common factor, she says, in both oral discourses is the empowerment of women by men. Hence even today the role of the high priestess in Hima Khyrim (Khyrim state one of the 25 Khasi states that existed before the British came to North East India after the Anglo-Burmese War and the signing of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826) remains the uncontested domain of the chieftain's (Syiem) mother or his eldest sister should his mother no longer be alive. No religious ceremony is complete without her presence. However, the practice in

Hima Khyrim is unique to it. No other Hima (Khasi state) practices what can be called a synthesis of politics and religion with the woman at the crux of the ceremony. Other Khasi states do not seem to have imbibed the practices of the Hima Khyrim.

The Khasi social system is founded upon certain ethics of commitment to the clan and respect for the paternal clan. Tip kur, tip kha means to know one's maternal clan (the *Kur*) and to respect the paternal clan (the *Kha*). The Khasi philosophy of life is neatly summed up in the phrases, *Tip Briew*, *Tip Blei* which means to know man and to know the creator and *Kamai Ia ka hok* which means to earn righteousness while on this earth.

It is ironic that a society which ostensibly bestows so much responsibility on women is also a society that decides a code of conduct for it. And who decides the role of a Khasi woman? Who decides how she should or should not behave? Interestingly, when we speak of societal codes of conduct we also have to know which are the dominant voices in society. Khasi women have been so contented managing their domestic affairs that they have left politics and the political dialectics completely to their male members. Hence women play no role in the Khasi political system symbolised by the 'Dorbar' or the hub of political debates. The Dorbar has 4 stages. There is the Dorbar iing (family dorbar) the Dorbar kur (clan dorbar) Dorbar Shnong (village dorbar) and Dorbar Raid (dorbar of a cluster of villages). In recent times what has survived in a strong form is the Dorbar Shnong and Dorbar Raid. The first two seem to have lost their importance. It is in the Dorbar iing or family dorbar that women can articulate their anxieties. The male members will then take those anxieties to the three other Dorbars.

Khasi women's hesitance to assert their views publicly can be attributed to the fact that they were restricted to do so in many subtle, overt and covert forms. A woman who speaks up publicly and takes interest in politics is feared. The society warns of such women as "the hen that crows." These labels that society puts on its womenfolk have therefore decided the course of political thinking here which is the same as in other societies. Politics is male-centric and bears a strong patriarchal bias. Till date not more than 10 Khasi women have been elected to the State Assembly of 60 members. At present there is only one woman legislator.

Esther Syiem also says that this social inhibition for women is also the reason why there are none or very few women writers in Khasi society.

Khasi matriliney is, according to studies conducted by sociologist Dev Nathan, the fastest eroding matrilineal society in the world. Whereas in the past women have held ownership over land and the youngest daughter (khatduh) is the custodian of family property and able to administer over that property, after informally consulting her maternal uncle, these days that control is slipping out of her hands. The anti-matrilineal movement led by a few Khasi males who, being influenced by patriarchal societies around them, have been spearheading a movement called the Synkhong Rympei Thymmai (foundation for a new hearth) is gaining momentum and getting more strident. This small but articulate group which is able to explain its angst to a growing breed of sociologists, film makers etc from across the world have been able to put this debate firmly in the public domain even if members of the Khasi society in

its length and breadth have yet to hear and understand this ‘strange’ proposition and are happy to live as their ancestresses designed the society.

The SRT is doing its best to problematize Khasi society and to interrogate its very foundation. In recent times the Khasi society is Some intellectuals in Khasi society argue that the land ownership pattern amongst Khasis being in the hands of women, male members have a poor economic status and are unable to take part in modern economic activities where land or real estate is the legal tender or collateral for availing bank loans or to be offered as equity in lieu of cash in other businesses. Taking the easiest route of all, men have blamed Khasi women of bartering away their custodial rights when they marry a non-Khasi, because, they allege, that if the khatduh or the only daughter marries a non-Khasi, the outsider gains control over all her ancestral property. It may be mentioned that in Khasi society the khatduh is an institution in herself.

Before the advent of Christianity the ‘khatduh’ played an important role in the family. Her parents stay with her until their death and she has the sole responsibility of looking after them. Perhaps this is the reason why she is given the bulk of the inheritance from her parents. Death in a non-Christian Khasi family entails several elaborate rituals. The khatduh prepares for the rituals even through the ceremony is conducted by a male member of the family, the maternal uncle or by a Lyngdoh (priest). These rituals include cremating the body of the dead, collecting the bones and interring them in the family ossuary. They are expensive rituals as they involve ceremonies such as feeding the family members, friends and well wishers and neighbours and also conducting the same rituals year after year on the death anniversaries of the deceased.

The khatduh being an institution, her home is open to all. Any member of the family in distress finds shelter in the khatduh’s home. Her brothers and sisters can continue to live in the ancestral home as long as they are unmarried. In case the khatduh’s brother or sister is divorced they can come back to the ancestral home. In such a situation, a man who marries the khatduh is expected to be as accommodating and open-hearted about including every members of her family and her extended family one under her roof. Often this is difficult for others to comprehend, more so if the khatduh marries a non-Khasi.

There have been organisations like the Mait Shaphrang Movement which have demanded that there be equal distribution of property between sons and daughters. Their contention is that the Khasi male owns virtually nothing and is therefore not given due respect by his in-laws. Normally the Khasi male bachelor gives all his earnings to his parents as long as he is unmarried. This is called the “*kamai nongkhyraw*.” Hence he has no savings and no property to call his own after marriage. Khasi men claim that this puts them at a disadvantage as they are not treated with respect by their wives and in-laws. They further assert that this pitiable status turns most of them to alcoholism. How true this claim is has not been established by research.

At the other end of the spectrum is the Khasi woman who is abandoned by her partner/husband and has absolutely no support whatsoever from society or the clan. It may be mentioned that the Khasis have a strong clan system and marriage between

the clans is taboo. But with time and the arrival of an aggressive market force into a once close-knit egalitarian society with strong communitarian values, things have changed drastically. The number of single mothers in Khasi society is very high; marriages are very brittle and marital discords very often lead to abandonment of the woman without any alimony whatsoever because such a thing was unknown. In the past a divorced woman could go back to her parental home and expect all the support due to her and her children. Things are no longer the same today. Most abandoned women are out on a limb.

Globalisation has put a price on everything including all natural resources such as land, water, forests, minerals etc. These were once common property resources that are expected to be shared resources. The forces of globalisation find it harder to negotiate a price with communities and prefer to strike deals with individuals. Hence it is today very common for Khasi men to be owning land, real estate, forest lands, mines etc when in the past ownership used to be with women. These rapidly changing social norms need to be examined as they are encroaching on the sanctity of the matrilineal system and threatening to marginalise women and their rights.

Strategies to reclaim those rights are imperative. One of the reasons why women have not resisted these subtle moves to upstage them is because they are not aware of the strength of the matrilineal system and that it is fast eroding. Attempts to spread this awareness through the media and other platforms have resulted in very discordant noises from male members of society, including male politicians. It is important to bring this important discourse before a very knowledgeable audience so that we can learn how to counter these ominous, negative trends in Khasi matrilineal society.

This paper seeks to bring before the table the essence of Khasi matrilineality and its descent into a chaotic mess where women are grappling for solutions on how to redeem their lost spaces.