

# SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN MEGHALAYA IN NORTH EAST INDIA

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## ABSTRACT:

North-East India has for a long time attracted interest as the Meeting-place of Indo-Aryan and Mongoloid races, each with its own distinctive culture, but each receiving as well as giving something of what it has, to create a society that is distinctive. One prominent feature of society in this region is the comparative freedom that women enjoy, albeit in different degrees. Just as North-East Indian society can be classified as either Aryan-based or Mongoloid within the so-called Mongoloid communities themselves, distinction must be made between those that are matrilineal, as in Meghalaya, and those that are patrilineal, as in the rest of the tribal areas of this region.<sup>1</sup> The three main characteristics of the 'matrilineal system' followed in the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia social structure are : (1) Matrilineal inheritance, (2) Matrilineal descent and (3) Uxorilocal residence.

**KEYWORD:** women, Meghalaya, social life, Garos, Khasis, Jainties.

## INTRADUCATION :

Meghalaya is the homeland of three tribes- The Garos, the Khasis and the Jainties. This is the only state where the main inhabitants follow matrilineal system of inheritance. Through it inheritance to property and succession to tribe office, both run through the female line, passing from the mother to the youngest daughter. This is all the more striking because the three groups belong to different ethnic backgrounds.

In a purely matrilineal and matrilocal society a women's standing is normally expected to be much better than of her compeer in patrilineal and patrilocal society. The Khasi and the Garo societies are described as having some elements of matriarchy and it is remarkable that they are amongst the very few people in the world who are characterised by following descent and inheritance in the female line. The Garos are matrilineal. Descent is traced through the mother only. All property belongs to the women, remains with her clan and is passed on from mother to daughter. Sons do not receive any part of the property which they themselves might have acquired by their own labour. On the day of his marriage, the man leaves his mother's house and goes with his wife to form a new family. His children also take their mother's clan's name. Generally the term matriarchy leads us to think that in such societies women enjoy a privileged position. But is it actually so? Is the lot of women in those societies different ?

It is significant that the institution of bride-price (which probably engenders a feeling of possession in husbands) does not exist in a matrilineal society like that of the Garos and Khasi-Pnars, presumably because of its incompatibility with a system in which the women plays a more important role in the social system than the man. This is, of course, often exaggerated and women themselves would be the last to arrogate to themselves the role of matriarchs. In fact, to the uninitiated, the idea that they 'rule the roost' is a favourite one, and others are led to believe that here women lay down the law for the family to follow. In practice this seldom occurs. Women is accorded respect as one through whom the race, or more precisely the clan, is propagated, but in recognition of the fact that her commitments as a mother and housewife are a fulltime occupation, responsibilities relating to regulation of the family are entrusted to men-folk.

Garo social system concentrates power in the *mahari*, which is the group of matrilineally related *males*. The father is the head of the family. He is known as *nokgipa* (owner). He can punish any member who does something wrong. Men and women work jointly for the subsistence of the family; and the work-load on the males and females is almost equal. Men's work is confined solely to hard work which the womenfolk are not capable of doing, such as felling trees, burning the jhum, construction of a house, etc. All other works such as planting and harvesting, and all domestic works such as cooking, husking of paddy, preparation of rice-beer, fetching of fuel and water, are all women's work.

In respect of exercising authority over the household possessions as well as landed property, the male member's work is final, although a woman's approving consent is sought for by the loving husband. She cannot, albeit, wield exclusive right over any material possession. Women have no accession to incorporeal property.

Women in the family are expected to respect the elderly males, whether they belong to the same sib or not. A woman who does not show respect to elderly men is despised by saying '*seko pako mande raja*'; which means 'she does not honour the father and husband'. A woman cannot divorce her husband out of her own accord. She must first consult her *chra* or male elders of her sib and get their approval. On the other hand, the *Chra* can get them separation if they want do so. An aggrieved woman first approaches her *chra* for redress. Her *chra* consider the pros and cons of the situation before taking a final step. Women can never raise their head against the decision of the *chra*. A compensatory factor of this meek submission is this: the women can assuredly depend upon their *chra* in the crises of life. It is considered to be a sacred obligation of the *chra* to capture a groom for a *mahari* girl who indicate her choice for a particular boy. The chosen boy must belong to a marriageable clan. In conformity with Garo tradition, the captured groom may escape for a time or two. Each time it is the duty of the *chra* to recapture the groom even without the expressed desire of the girl. In the case of selecting a *nokrom*, however, the girl has neither any voice nor any choice for her wife's mate. It is purely and exclusively a matter of concern for the *mahari* elders who collectively take a decision. In a woman's sexual life, too, she can never rebuff the advances of her husband even though she may temporarily be angry with him on one count or another. A husband's sex-demands must be met by his wife. Again, it is the concern of the *mahari* to find out a suitable husband for a widow or a divorced woman.

*Mahari* signifies closely related blood relatives within the clan. In the affairs of the *mahari*, the women have no voice at all. Such matters are decided exclusively by the male elders. In deciding affairs of the *mahari*, however, the opinions of the *ga'chi* (males of other clans who have married into that particular *mahari*) are also taken into consideration. And as males do not consider the opinion of women in such matters necessary, there is no way for the women to influence the *mahari* affairs, except through their husbands. Even regarding matters concerning women, the opinion of the women concerned or all the women in general of the *mahari* is not considered as essential. Women must always abide by the decision of the male elders. Marriages are settled by *mahari* and the opinion of the girl is not considered significant. The *mahari* can decide to give a very young girl in marriage to an elderly person, and the girl has no redress.<sup>2</sup>

Women are quite excluded from village administration. A woman can never be a village headman (*nokma*), because a village *nokma* has certain ceremonial functions, and such ceremonial rites cannot be performed by a women. The position occupied by women in village office is considered to be the lowest and equivalent to that of children. In areas where there are bachelors' dormitories, women, the *nokma*'s wife, are not allowed to enter the dormitory by the front entrance.

In Garo society property is inherited in the female line, but a man must always be there to manage property. However, the case of widows is different. In all other cases, the husband manages property, and when he is too old he passed over the management to his sister's son, whom he brings as his *nokrom* or resident son-in-law. In no case can a woman sell or transfer any property. Women may make certain incomes, such as— by selling rice-beer, which need not necessarily be spent towards the general expenditure of the family. But she cannot spend such amount without the consent of her husband. However, such amounts may be used for purchasing something for her or for the children.<sup>3</sup>

From the above discussion it is clear that among the Garos, male blood relations or *mahari* exercise control over affairs of the family and even in matters affecting women. In arrangements of marriage, for instance, women are not consulted though male in-law often are. In relation to property, though it is inherited in female line, it is always managed by the male *mahari*.

The Khasi society is matrilineal and female centred. The succession is traced to the female. Pointing to the significant pattern of the residence of the spouse after marriage, Gurdon stated-- "The most remarkable feature of the Khasi marriage is that it is usual for the husband to live with his wife in his mother-in-law's house. This arrangement amongst the Khasis is no doubt due to the prevalence of the matriarchate."<sup>4</sup> Many of the Khasi authors and intellectuals differ with the views of Gurdon. The reason being the matrilocal residence is not defiantly concomitant of matriarchate or matrilineal society.<sup>5</sup> The word matriarchate is, used in a limited sense, and a society can be regarded as matriarchate where inheritance is reckoned in the female line.<sup>6</sup> and also where the family life of the early Khasi society revolved round the mother who had the authority over the ancestral property for descent was matrilineal and because of the matri-local residence the continuity of tradition in the house of birth was well maintained.<sup>7</sup>

There is a old saying among the Khasis-- "*Long jaid Noka kynthai* (from the woman sprang the clan). The woman is the custodian of the property and also the keeper of the health and kitchen of the Khasi home" In their social system the Khasis are matrilineal and they recognise matrilineal descent but it should not be confused with a matriarchate society. The woman is the mistress of the household and the custodian of wealth and property but not proprietress. The man is the master in war and peace. The maternal uncle is the undisputed director of the ancestral wealth and property where the father is the provider, the master and guide of the family. There was a clear division of functions between the household and the world outside."<sup>8</sup> N. Narorojan however maintained and believed that the woman of the Khasi society was active participant in war with proven soldierly qualities and also enjoyed power and prestige without supermacy and under safeguards.

The woman had power and authority in the matter legislative, executive and judicial process. She believed that 'a female *syiem* ruler was elected in a very special circumstances when there were no male *syiems* to rule the state.'<sup>9</sup>

The woman as the fountain head of a clan is held in high esteem. She is the embodiment of all that is good in house. She is popularly known as *Lukhimai* being the guardian spirit of the house. Daulatram, the Governor of undivided Assam indicated the changes in the thinking of the Khasi society. 'I have been an admirer of some of your customs. I think there is great deal to be said for the matrilineal system. I sometimes feel that indirectly it has considerable effect in encouraging the free progress of the woman and it tends to make them real equals of men. Their innate qualities get scope for evolution and development and they are more mature members of their society than are their sisters elsewhere. You sometime give them a position in public affairs which any can envy.'<sup>10</sup>

Among the Khasi-pnars, household responsibilities are shared between the maternal uncle and the father. There is a saying that the father provides for the family's livelihood, but the uncle has to deal with matters of life and death. In other words, the father earns for his own wife and children; but in matters affecting the clan, or the family, (excluding the father who must belong to a different clan), such matters as the arrangement of marriages, management of ancestral property and performance of religious duties (in non-Christian families), it is the uncle, who makes decisions though generally in consultation with other members of the family. This situation is particularly true of the youngest daughter who is the principal, if not the sole, heiress to the family property. She cannot dispose of ancestral property without the consent of the uncle. In conservative families, their advice in matters to social conduct and behaviour is often sought. The impact of modernism and of other cultures has no doubt eroded the maternal uncle's authority but by and large the convention is still honoured. In Khasi society, the husband (and father) because he belongs to a different clan, is isolated from his wife and children in such social matters. In non-Christian families, even in death, his bones must not lie with those of his wife and children but must be deposited in a separate ossuary with those of his maternal or blood relations. Yet, while he lives, his authority as father is respected. In well-organised families, the duties of a father and those of the uncle are clearly defined. Troubles, if and when they arise, are caused by intrusion of one into the sphere that property belongs to the other. This isolation of the husband from the wife's family is carried to a greater length among the pnar, especially in orthodox families. Often the husband may only be at his wife's home during the night. By the morning he may only be at his wife's home during the night. By the morning he is out, to return to his maternal home. There alone he can act freely.

In spite of the inter-action of other cultures and social system in the modern situation, there are very few signs of a desire to change on the part of the people. There is no doubt that this time-tested system has many obvious merits. Women enjoy a freedom and independence that their sisters in other Indian communities do not. Many look after their own interests and earn their livelihood with success. Although as a rule they have no direct say in communal matters, in their own families they expect a good deal of influence.

The institution of 'nok-na' among Garos or 'Khadduh' among Khasi-pnars confers general advantage upon the community in that at least in theory it assures protection to every member of the family. In a society where everyone, who is born, belongs to the mother, obviously the crippling stigma of illegitimacy cannot exist. The almost total absence of vagrancy or beggary testifies to the salutary influence that the institution has upon the social fabric even in the modern context.<sup>11</sup>

### Conclusion

Conditions in Meghalaya are changing very rapidly. Schools have been opened in the interior areas and nowadays the number of educated girls will not be less than that of educated boys. However, it is a good sign that education has not caused in any major change in the essential elements of their social structure. This will give them a better prospect for development, because in this society they do not suffer any social disadvantage, and many hurdles confronted in developing the women-folk in the greater Indian society (which has a distinctively male bias) will not be met in developing Garo, Khasi and jaintia women-folk. The women of Meghalaya are not the weaker section of the society, but they are the equal partners in a harmonious society.<sup>12</sup>

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