

ABSTRACT

The significance of this study is principally three fold: firstly, the focus herein is away from the extravagance of ceremonies and performances, but the thrust has been to understand the thoughts and ideas infused in the folk practices that impacts the Khasi social practices and organisations. Furthermore, Khasi worldview is explored in the context of the gendered roles and performances in the folk media, which makes this study important. Secondly, the study takes cognizance of the chasm between tradition and modernity, but delves more in the space where both intermingle. In a world which is grappling with rapid homogenisation, hybridisation and people's movement for identity assertion, a study on folk beliefs, philosophy and practices does make a case. Thirdly, the Khasi society is witnessing an upsurge wherein demands for patriliney is emergent raising many questions on the viability of continuing matriliney. In a kinship structure and philosophy, which seemingly is in favour of the women, an analysis of the folk media unveils the dichotomy that prevails in the Khasi society that calls for an ingenious rethinking. Notwithstanding the fact that in the course of history, many society have given up the system of mother's right, yet the Khasis till day study have held on to matriliney. Thereby, the principal focus of the study has been to understand the implications of the Khasi matrilineal social structure via the folk, which is as relevant and contemporary.

Folk media grows as the society advances and helps in maintaining the necessary concert for a society to function. Therefore, it is not an external entity but entwined in the system of the society itself having a profound influence on the culture and life of the people. In this light, it becomes obvious that every community has its own folk media that represents idiosyncratically its traditions, beliefs and culture. In short, folk media is embedded in the culture and social structure of a community. Traditional cultural forms are often understood as folk media, ingrained in native culture, originating from diverse societies and developing over time; they have been continuously used for moral, religious and socio-political education.

Against this milieu the study has been an endeavour to construe the meanings that are infused in folk media which is handed down across generations. And also understand matriliney in contemporary times, using folk media as a lens. The thrust of the enquiry is on Khasi folk media and matriliney as practised by the Khasis of Meghalaya.

The theory of symbolic interactionism as a framework forms the basis of understanding the Khasi society by addressing the meanings that people impose on objects, events, and behaviours. The core principles of the theory consists of meaning, language and thought which leads to the inference about the formation of a person's self and socialisation into a greater community. Meanings are given importance since it is believed that people act based on what they accept as true and not just on what is objectively true. Thus, society is thought to be socially constructed through human interpretation. People construe one another's behaviour and it is these elucidations that form the social bond. The concepts of social construct, interaction, interpretation, language, symbol-mediated communication are taken as the base for examining Khasi matriliney and folk media. How, through a process of folk communication, subsequent interaction and interpretation, connotations of matriliney have been fashioned and transmitted? How, the folk has been formed and transmitted over centuries, people's perception towards it, what people understand out of it? That folk media and matriliney both are matrixes that have been formed out of the social process where people interact amongst each other. Folk media and matriliney are both the core elements of Khasi social life. Positioning them within the larger framework of symbolic interactionist perspective enables micro level analysis of social patterns. Folk media is the micro structure, embedded with the competencies of creating the arena for interaction where information is exchanged and interpretation takes place. As a result of worldview, philosophies and norms about the macro structure i.e. matriliney is formed, reinforced and perpetuated.

The Khasi society after an extended era of interaction with the British government and encounter with Christianity, has experienced remarkable socio-cultural and economic fluctuations. Many scholars argue that the processes of urbanisation and

evangelisation have been significantly responsible for the weaying of the folk practices and norms of the Khasis. For instance, the cultural practices of instituting megaliths; household and community festivities; ceremonies related to marriage or funeral; naming ceremonies; dances that would take place after a new house is built, have almost become non-existent. Though some elementary components of socio-cultural life like matriliney and traditional administrative system have persisted, yet many other aspects of the folk culture have disappeared. This is one of the key reasons for which this study is considered appropriate and significant.

This study explores and understands the social set-up of the Khasi community i.e. matriliney, through the lens of folk media. The Khasis become an important community to study for they have held on to matriliney, despite history standing testimony that many society over a period of time have shifted from mother's right to father's right. The prime focus of the study has been to understand and relate the Khasi matrilineal social structure with the folk media which is an important communication channel, for no society can function or exist without a communication system.

The study has been conducted with the following objectives:

- i) Understand the different folk forms and decipher traces of matriliney.
- ii) Analyse and examine the role of folk media in transmitting Khasi customs and traditions through generations.
- iii) Comprehend the changes and continuity that folk media has experienced post the advent of Christianity.
- iv) Get an insight on the gender equation as perpetuated through folk media and subsequently to locate the position of women.
- v) Find out the relevance of folk media and matriliney in the present Khasi society.

In understanding and analysing matriliney vis-à-vis folk media, it becomes a paramount necessity to get first-hand account from the direct practitioners of the communication system as well other important stakeholders of the community. For

the interview, an optimum sample size of respondents was interviewed by making use of both structured and unstructured questions. The population was purposively stratified into representative categories inclusive of old people (village elders), church leaders, members of Seng Khasi, young professionals (male and female), members of Seng Kynthei (Malki), academicians and intellectuals. The informants were then randomly selected from the proposed categories.

The study had sorted out Kongthong, Wakhen, Rangthylliang and Nongbah Myrdon. Other than the villages, respondents were also interviewed from Shillong town. Two important festivals were also part of the study namely, Pomblang festival and Seng Kut Snem festival. Observation technique (non-participant) was used as a supplementary tool for gathering primary information on rituals and dances during the festivals. Furthermore, the audience and participants of the festivals both male and female were interviewed. Audio-visual recordings and photographs were taken to document the events.

Additionally, two daily newspapers *Mawphor* (Vernacular) and *Shillong Times* (English) were taken up for analysis. The newspaper coverage for a period of one year (January-December 2014) was evaluated to assess the frequency of coverage and type of news content with relation to Khasi folk media and matriliney.

The thesis has six chapters, inclusive of the introduction and the conclusion. The first chapter, is the introductory chapter provides a rationale behind the work and places the study in a theoretical context to enable the reader to understand and appreciate the objective of the study. It deliberates on the methodology of the study and concisely introduces the field setting, where the fieldwork has been carried out.

The second chapter, begins with comprehensive overview of concept of kinship systems with a focus on matriliney and progresses to an analysis of Khasi matriliney. And subsequently, Khasi matriliney is discussed and with the help of field narratives, the changes and transition experienced within the Khasi society is underlined.

In terms of lineage or descent, Khasi matriliney still continues to trace the lineage through the mother, but the factors like urbanisation, religious conversion, and economy have affected the idea of the *Kpoh* (womb) and the *Iing* which is the

matrilineal unit. In case of authority, there is scuffle concerning possession and authority. For instance, land and other property are in the possession of the females but the authority over the use and sale of the property lies with the male (maternal uncle and in the new circumstances the father). Emblematically the *Khadduh* maintains the religion *Ka Bat La Ka Niam*, but it is the eldest maternal uncle, *Kni Rangbah* who executes the rites and rituals. The *Khadduh* is the keeper of ancestral property with conditions, albeit unwritten and implicit. For a man, the role as the maternal uncle was traditionally more significant, but gradually along with being the *Kni*, a man's role as the father *Kpa*, in a household is being recognised and upheld. In matters related to residence the strain concerning individual (nuclear) family and the matrilineal descent groups is burgeoning. In case of inheritance, traditionally it is the daughters who inherit the property, though there are differences in system of property distribution in certain areas of Khasi hills, where both son and daughters get equal share. With the rising demand for equitable property distribution, conflict arises between two groups of successors - a man's children on one side and his nephews/nieces on the other.

In the third chapter, the preliminary focus is on the examination of folk media and its relevance in the modern day, wherein the term media implies a source or means of communicating via the folk. Subsequently, the chapter progresses to an exploration of Khasi folk media in the milieu of the established discourse on folk media. The argument that is being made in the course of this study is that no society can survive without communicating, any change, any crisis or any movement in a society cannot be taking place without communication. Establishment of social-political norms, ethos and structure also needs some form of communication to occur. Thus, the relevance of folk media as a communication medium has been established. Following which, folk media of the Khasis is being examined to establish possible linkages to matrilineal tenets. This further helps in understanding the role of folk media, in perpetuating matrilineality among the Khasis since times immemorial. It is a probable factor owing to which matrilineality still holds the Khasi community, even in the face of varied challenges.

In the fourth chapter, the significance of folk media and its underpinnings of worldview is discussed. Also, a mention is made about the relevance of examining folk media and identity formation. Following which deliberation is made on the potential linkages between Khasi folk media and matriliney. The argument being that, certain matrilineal principles have been encoded in the folk forms, which is a factor that is playing a role in the sustenance of matriliney till day.

The purpose of this study is not to romanticise matriliney or folk media, but the focus is to understand matrilineal set-up in contemporary times through the prism of folk media. A close look at Khasi folk form reveals that it is laden with the ethos of matrilineality; some aspects may be overt while others covert, but its manifestation is most certainly evident. Because folk media forms are manifested in matrilineal connotations, it has been perpetuated across generations. The tenets of matriliney, its beliefs and practices have not been at large but remain in shared collective memory and living through the folk media. Researchers across domains have researched about Khasi matriliney and Khasi folk traditions in isolation, though a common argument being both Khasi matriliney and folk tradition are integral part of who a Khasi is, and what constitutes Khasi identity. In this light, to draw a parallel between Khasi matriliney and folk traditions does make a case.

Gender equation in the Khasi society is an important theme that has emerged in the course of the study and this has been discussed in the fifth chapter. The position of women in Khasi society is deliberated which is traced through the folk practices vis-à-vis the social set-up, in understanding the gender continuum among the Khasis. The power differentials in Khasi folk media is empirically and vividly evident, which is echoed in the socio-political life. The analysis of the folk practices reveals the unerring way in which the position of Khasi women has been defined. Because the folk media supports the continuation of these norms and philosophies, even in current times, the Khasi women live in the shadow of these age-old traditions.

Thus, it is seen that the varied forms of folk media are perforated in the complex social events, with the intention to implement symbolic power, putting the Khasi

women in a secondary position. The folk media function as socio-political ordinances used to influence community members of the assumed feebleness, delicateness, and powerlessness of women and accredit the dependence of women on men. In actuality it appears that Khasis are a matrilineal society with patriarchal realities.

This study is imbued with the argument that even in modern times, social change or movements, social structures and society at large can be examined using indigenous knowledge which is as a complementary partner to modernity. Folk media has been studied at length not only by folklorists but also by scholars from different domains like anthropology, history, communication and more. Folk media and its associations to development activities, education, literacy programmes, political campaign, etc. have been thoroughly researched, but there are few studies that correlate folk media to social structure. The Khasi society, which till date is sustaining its matrilineal culture, is combating with numerous challenges that have necessitated a process of self-evaluation and re-visitation of the traditions, decrees and customary laws, *Iawbei* and the deeply rooted matrilineal system of the Khasi social structure. The varied folk forms of the Khasis like the oral narratives, folk dances and rituals have fundamentally been an enunciation of ethnic and religious identities and of the sacredness of the matrilineal, social order, social structure and political organisation. It appears like a 'strategic knowledge system' (Sen, 2010, 18) functioning as a communication apparatus anchoring and promulgating community life, refurbishing and improving shared beliefs.
