

CHAPTER II

Matrilineal Societies: Understanding and Locating Khasi Matriliny

The present status of Khasi matriliney is best described by Sngi Lyngdoh who looks at the Khasi scene today and says that the Khasi's present family system is not the original, pure and true matrilineal system of their wise ancestors. The present one is a system that has no root in history... What we have today says Sngi is not even (the) shadow! Nay, it is just a scare-crow with no life, no strength and devoid of efficiency. (Cited in Kharkrang, 2012, 122)

This 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.

2.1 Overview on Matriliney

Institutions are fragments of social construct, and have been shaped and reconditioned as per the necessities of the society. Family is the rudimentary institution in all human evolutions, even though its characteristic may be varied. The basis of human society is the family, across communities and cultures, it is found in some form. Society and family are essentially connected, where a society contains the families in it. Society cedes the key characterising aspect of the families within it, and families' condition within themselves the broad features of society. A society preserves itself through the family, by means of the biological reproduction and cultural tradition. "Both are transmissions from the older generation to the younger one. Passing along seems to be life's one sole purpose most serious business" (Kharkrang, 2012, 1).

Universally the biological perpetuation is similar, but the cultural prolongation is diverse and is peculiar to a society in itself. Thus, it is implied that a family comprises of the older and younger generations, where, who constitutes the members of the two generations depends on family system that is followed, all of which is mandated by culture. “The crucial dynamics in the family system are determined by who of the parents, father or mother hands down the three constitutive elements to whom of the children, son(s) or daughter(s)” (ibid., 2). Along the lines it is evident that the family system is patrilineal when fathers pass the descent, succession and inheritance to sons. Conversely, when mothers pass on descent, succession and inheritance to daughters the family system is matrilineal. “Patriliney and matriliney are really two family systems each of which specifies the rules and principles according to which families perpetuate themselves” (ibid., 3). The word ‘matrilineal’ comes from the Latin words *mater matris*, ‘mother’, and connotes kinship or descent along the mother or female line. As per the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology,

Matrilineages are unilineal descent groups that claim real or fictive kinship through maternal ties to a common ancestress through known genealogical links. In matrilineal systems, inheritance is traced from the maternal uncle (mother's brother) to the nephew (mother's son). The tendency is to preserve the economic and political identity of the sibling group. The means by which this is ensured entail control of women's labour, sexuality, and reproductive powers, by distributing them between husbands and brothers. Matriliney should thus never be considered as a system, which somehow empowers women - and should not be confused with matriarchy. (2009, 455)

Schneider and Gough in their book *Matrilineal Kinship* stated that, “a system which includes the matrilineal principle but does not include the patrilineal principle will be called a matrilineal system” (1962, 3). They also state that matrilineal societies

are defined by essentials like a) children are taken care by the woman b) the men have right over women and children and c) matrilineal groups practice exogamy.

A group in which the kinship structure traces its familial ancestry through the mother's line is called a matrilineal society or matriliney. Each society integrates in itself certain fundamental elements like family, marriage, residency system, inheritance, rules that govern sexual relations amongst some groups of kinfolds, which helps in establishing the kinship system.

Here, the concepts of descent, succession, inheritance and residence can be elaborated further:

1) Descent provides the next generation with an identity, a sense of belonging to maternal or paternal side. In modern day parlance, it is called surname or title. It mandates which line that children will extend, also decides the residence pattern- patrilocal or matrilocal.

2) Inheritance demarcates the ownership of movable and immovable property. This can be called the foundation of patriliney where land is passed on to the sons and in matriliney it is handed down to the daughters. "Wealth flow under matriliney and patriliney are supposedly patterned differently because of differences in children's allegiance to their relatives" (Mtika and Doctor, 2002, 73).

3) Succession in this case is disingenuous and authority is more apposite the focal point of decision making. In patriliney the first-born son succeeds the father where he has the authority over the family. The nephew succeeds the uncle in a matrilineal set-up.

4) Another aspect to which the concepts of descent, succession and inheritance are connected is residence. In a matrilineal set-up, the residence system is uxori-local, in which a married couple resides in the wife's house, for the children the residence is matrilocal. By contrast, virilocal system is followed in patriliney where the wife comes to live in the husband's house, and for the children it is patrilocal residence. Residence is also interwoven with the idea of territory which provides a sense of identity, proprietorship and security. It is important to note that the residence

system approved by patriliney or matriliney is not based on factors like employment or livelihood, religion, financial condition or education; it is more of a cultural consideration. "Residence is thus the physical, or a visible, public statement, a silent declaration of appropriation, ownership, of ultimate control over children-descent, property-inheritance and authority-succession" (Kharkrang, 2012, 39). In patriliney the man/father is in control of all three elements - descent, succession and inheritance, whereas in matriliney, women/sister shares these elements with her brothers (maternal uncle is the authority in a matrilineal household).

2.1.1 Exemplar of Matrilineal Cultures

Societies adhering to matrilineal structures are found in several places globally for instance, in pockets of Southeast Asia, Africa and India. The cultural traditions vary considerably among these communities, however there are some similarities as well. Asante or Ashanti are the biggest tribe in Ghana and one of the few matrilineal societies in West Africa. The Ashanti women acquire status and property straight from their mothers. For the Ashanti tribe, the family and the mother's clan are of utmost significance. They believe that a child acquires the father's soul or life-force and gets flesh and blood from the mother, thus they connect closely with the mother's clan.

The Minangkabau (also identified as Minang or Padang) of Sumatra, Indonesia, are the world's biggest matrilineal society, in which properties such as land and houses are succeeded through female descent. Amongst the Minangkabaus, the man conventionally marries into his wife's house, and the woman accedes the ancestral household, while religious and administrative matters are the domain of men.

It is also seen that in Malawi a landlocked country in southeast Africa, the ethnic group, the Yao follow matriliney. The Chewa community of Malawi is "undergoing change from matrilineal to patrilineal practices" (Mtika and Doctor, 2002, 74).

Although the matrilineal system was much more extensively distributed in India, the matrilineal groups bearing matrilineal elements are now predominantly found in the Northeast region. Matrilineal societies in India are exemplified by the Khasi, Jaintia and Garos in the state of Meghalaya state. The Khasi commonly follow the

matrilocal residence arrangement or neolocal dwelling system where the pair establishes a new house in or nearby the wife's maternal home.

In the Indian context, the Khasis from Meghalaya are one of the few societies that follow matriliney till this day, others being Jaintia and Garo tribes of the same state, which many consider the cynosure matrilineal communities in India and Asia.

2.2 From Matriliney to Patriliney

Societies since time immemorial have adopted one or the other form of family set-up - patriliney/matriliny. It has been seen that there have been shifts in the family system where matrilineal societies have changed over to patrilineal systems. The 19th century scholars like Johann Jakob Bachofen and Lewis Henry Morgan have argued that matriliney existed much before patriliney; it signified an earlier evolutionary phase and that matriliney gradually gave way to patriliney. This idea was grounded on Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, consequently patrilineal systems were deemed to be more refined and advanced. History stands testimony to the transformation of many societies to patriliney. "Writing within the framework of the evolutionary thinking developing at the time, Morgan also argued that matrilineal systems would progressively evolve into patrilineal systems. Over time that view gained popularity far beyond anthropological and ethnological circles" (Narayan, 2014).

In the book, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (2009), Friedrich Engels, outlined the kinship arrangement that existed in the primitive times and how changeover took place from mother's right to father's right. Citing from the work of Bachofen - *Mother Right*, Engles reasoned that the people of olden times followed matriarchy owing to the system of hetaerism - a society that existed in primitive period, in which women were communally shared thereby, any verdict concerning paternity could not be defined and there was no substitute but to give space for mother's right/gynaecocracy. Only successively when hetaerism gave way to monogamy did the conversion from mother's right to father's right evolve.

According to Bachofen, it is not the development of the actual conditions under which men live but the religious reflections of

these conditions of life in the minds of men that brought about historical changes in the mutual social position of man and woman.
(Engels, 2009, 10)

Bachofen also states that it is woman who must have wanted faithfulness, steady marriage leading to the institution of monogamy, which succeeded in abating the primitive convention of sexual interaction, development of economic conditions, growth in population etc. From the minutiae of kinship networks emerges the concept of ownership of property. According to mother's right, the property ought to stay with the gens and the gentile relatives of the deceased who can take over the property. But this was transformed with a small adjustment, the progenies of the male members should remain in the gens and those of the females were to be left out and reallocated to the father, thus making space for male lineage and inheritance from father, in short patriarchy.

Monogamy rose owing to economic factors and the modifications that took place in it also supervened due to economic reasons which lead to alterations in the position of both men and women. With the transfer of inheritance from mother's right to father's right, matrimony also began to be arranged based on economic factors. As a result, economy played a dynamic role where everything was reckoned as a commodity, rights and customs were substituted with consumption and sale. However, in modern times there exist some cultures that still follow the system of mother's right and it becomes imperative to revisit such societies.

Even in contemporary times, many matrilineal societies have undergone change and embraced patriliney and it is said that "all cultures are in a constant state of change" (Raha, 1989, 8). Till the middle of the previous century, Nayers of Kerala too followed matriliney but adapted to patriliney through numerous enactments. The adaptation in the social set-up of a society takes place owing to several factors. One factor is the interaction amongst two cultures in which interchange of philosophies, practices and traditions takes place.

"The fundamental processes of culture change are connected with the modification in the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of the individuals...who composed a

society” (Raha, 1989, 9). In case of India, notably from the pre-independence era tribal societies were introduced to a new faith – Christianity. Many scholars opine that Christianity with its patriarchal predisposition and thrust on the idea of family as a sacrosanct unit could have been instrumental in sowing the ideas of patriliney among many communities.

The Rabha community from Assam like the Nayars had also incorporated patriliney in their socio-cultural life. “Change among the village Rabhas is the result of contact and interactions with the patrilineal Rajbanis who have imbued these Rabhas with the patrilineal Hindu cultural elements. They have thus hammered on the root of their traditional culture and have paved the way for the change. The impact of modernization, urbanisation, market and cash economy etc. have only forced the pace of change in the Rabha culture” (Raha, 1989, 3). The Rabhas had accepted ‘patriarchalization’ by adopting the cultural traits from the patrilineal Hindu castes along with other internal and external factors.

In case of the Koches residing in the Garo Hills of Meghalaya; a phase of transition from a matrilineal based society to a patrilineal society was an outcome of the steady acceptance of Hindu practices. “In the case of the matrilineal Nayars also ‘the increase in the establishment of paternal elementary families gradually split *Tarward* (matrilineal joint family) into pieces, lessening the function of *Tarwad* though among the Nayars it may not be a shift ‘to a patrilineal system but may be patrimonial system with a kind of bilateral arrangement’” (Raha, 1989, 13-14).

The matrilineal principle was universally regarded as obsolescent.

In its place the elementary family was rapidly becoming the effective unit of residence, economic cooperation, legal responsibility, and socialization. (Gough, 1962b, 647, cited in Raha, 1989, 15)

2.3 Understanding and Locating Khasi Matriliney

Family is a component of social organisation and human society has embraced some form of family system. By definition, a family is a small cluster typified by relationships in which the members are interconnected by kinship or marriage.

Family lives within the society and has considerable impact on it. Rules of descent, residence, inheritance and authority help in determining the different types of family be it matriliney or patriliney.

The Khasis are one of the earliest settlers in Northeast India, and are known to follow a matrilineal social set-up. The Khasis and their matrilineal system for long have been the cynosure among researchers across domains. It is imperative at the onset to determine on what presets Khasi society is considered matrilineal.

2.3.1 On Grounds of Descent - The household in which lineage is drawn via the mother's line is a defining character of a matrilineal family. The Khasis believe in the saying *Long Jaid Na Ka Kynthei* - from the woman originates the clan, i.e. descent is traced from the mother line and not the woman. It is to be noted that "the social structure of the Khasi is that of the clan *Kur* or consanguine kin group; each *Kur* tracing back their origin to the grandmother of the root i.e. *Ki Iawbei Tynrai*" (Talukdar, 2004, 13).

Traditionally the Khasis are believed to be the offsprings from one *Iawbei* (root ancestress) *Shi Kpoh* (one womb). There is a clear difference between the *Kur* (matri kin) and the *Kha* (patri kin), said 23 year old Khraw Shanpru. "*Kpoh* may not necessarily be an institutional corporate and functional unit but it has a larger structure and membership than an *Iing*. The customary laws are very binding on the Khasis in general and more so in each *Kpoh*, in any crisis or time of joy, *Kpoh* is to be a source of help. All this indicates the unity and solidarity of the matrilineal structure" (Shangpliang, 2014).

Among the Khasis the biggest demarcation that exists is in their relation to *Kur* which is an equivalent of clan. "The *Kur* is an exogamous unit and every member is a kin of every other person of the same *Kur*. Hence every member belonging to the same *Kur* refer to each other collectively as *Shi Kur* or kin belonging to a single *Kur*. The basis of this is that they have all descended from a common ancestress" (Lyngdoh & Nongkynrih, 2015, 39). By being a member of the *Kur* one can recognise other members of the clan and "accept each other as brothers and sisters on the basis of fictitious consanguinity. The *Kur* comes into being when the female

children of Khasi women get married and perpetuate the lineage of their mothers by producing children. Each such married daughter starts what is known as *Ka Kpoh*, which during the course of time develops into a number of lineages which share the same identification name with other lineages of *Ka Kpoh*. The name of *Ka Kpoh* is called *Ka Jait*. Members of different *Kpoh* having different *Jait* names develop a kinship affiliation believing to have ascended from a common female ancestress” (ibid., 39). *Ka Iing* (domestic group of matrilineal kins) is the most vital unit in a descent group which is the nethermost level of clan division, and as members of *Ka Iing*, men and women have designated position and duties.

2.3.2 On Grounds of Authority - A society is also matrilineal wherein the decision making in a household rests with the maternal uncle and subsequently passes on to his nephew is another facet of matrilineality. The ‘man’ as the maternal uncle among the Khasis has responsibilities towards his natal home in all matters related to marriage, religious rites and property. Maternal uncle in the Khasi society is acknowledged as the administrator of the family property. It is a matrilineal society where the authority is in the hands of the maternal uncles, the woman at the same time has privileges over the house and property, custodian of family rituals and customs, and she is also the keeper and protector of her clan, household and descent.

Aged 44, Suklin Khongjee informed, “the *Kni* (maternal uncle) has an indispensable role in all family matters, more so for those who still follow *Niam Khasi*, we are Christian and in our family still *Kni*’s decision and suggestion is very important”. Thus, the family duties are divided three-way - the women is responsible for the hearth, the father should provide for the essential necessities of his wife and children. And the maternal uncle looks after the family matters related to property, religion, birth, naming ceremony, death, settling disputes and mediate amongst clans at the time of marriage to warrant that no incest takes place among clans (*Ka Sang Ka Ma*). This is a characteristic of matrilineal society where the authority is vested with a male member of the mother’s family, whereas in a patrilineal household authority lies with male members of the father’s family.

“In matrilineal societies the mother’s brother plays an important role in the life of his sister and sister’s children because he acts as their guardian” (Lyngdoh & Nongkynrih, 2015, 37). The mother’s brother is bequeathed the task of teaching and imparting knowledge to the nephews and nieces. A man “shuttled between his mother’s *Iing* and his wife’s *Iing* and fulfilled the role of uncle and father with equal responsibility” (ibid., 40). Which implies, that in a Khasi society the man is expected to discharge his duties both as a father and maternal uncle, as a son and husband, shuffling between two households (*Iing*), his paternal home and his wife’s home.

2.3.3 On Grounds of Residence - Rules of residence are mainly patrilocal, matrilocal and neolocal. A society is also considered matrilineal if it follows the matrilocal residence system. In this form of residence, the husband, post-marriage goes to live in the wife’s natal house. Among the Khasis too, matrilocal residence is the traditional norm. An octogenarian respondent informed that it is Khasi custom that the men go and stay in the wife’s house after marriage but he is still very much part of his own *Kur* (matri kin) and *Kha* (patri kin). A man does not abandon his relationship with his own clan post-marriage.

2.3.4 On Grounds of Inheritance - In matters of inheritance a society is described as matrilineal when the inheritance is also determined from the mother’s line and daughters inherit the property. The right to inherit property lies with the women. *Ka Khadduh* (youngest daughter) is the keeper of the religion, *Ka Bat Ka Niam*, and we call her house *Ka Iing Seng* or *Ka Iing Niam*, where customarily all family occasions and rituals take place, said a 32 year old Banjop Thangkiew. The youngest daughter is also the custodian of family property, and further it is passed on to her youngest daughter and the like. The other sisters too have a share and right over the family property, and they are also obligated to repair and maintain the house of the *Khadduh*. In the case of the death of the *Khadduh*, the second youngest daughter is made the successor. If the *Khadduh* fails in her duties by converting her religion, or committing *Sang* (a forbidden act), or if she does not have a female child then the property passes on to mother sisters (the maternal aunts) and their female progenies.

These are some of the basic premises on which an overview of Khasi matriliney is presented. A common misnomer that many scholars have upheld while writing about the Khasis is that, the Khasis are a 'matriarchal' society and woman are all powerful, but the fact remains that Khasis are a matrilineal society. There is a substantial repository of information on Khasi matriliney, but even to this day there are aspects of it that needs to be researched and re-examined. In the ensuing paragraphs, secondary literatures juxtaposed with people's narratives are used to revisit Khasi matriliney in current times.

2.4 Khasi Matriliney in Contemporary Times

Modification is the decree of nature and the social organisation is subject to unremitting change. It is known that a society is not static; it is dynamic, evolving and changing owing to the impact of several factors. Social change is indicative of the alterations which take place in the social procedures, social arrangements or social organisation of people's life. In the process of social change, modifications take place in all components wherein philosophies and principles, institutional organisations and functions go through transformation. The rapidity and magnitude of change will vary from one society to another, but change seems to be inevitable. The Khasi matrilineal society is no different; it has been facing the winds of change from the time of its encounter with colonial rulers, Christian missionaries and exposure to other societies from different parts of India.

Change in a society is brought about by both internal and external factors operating within a society which has its distinctive language, custom, culture and belief system. Social change primarily is indicative of the modification of the apparatuses in the social structure, defined by alterations in norms of behaviour, cultural cyphers, social system or value systems.

Any alteration in social relationships in the broadest sense implies social change. Observed this way, social change is a pervasive occurrence in any society. A variation is sometimes made then between progressions of change within the social organisation, which serve in fragments to preserve the structure, and developments that modify the structure (societal change) (Form and Wilterdink, 2009).

For the Khasi society post the dawn of colonialism and Christianity the process of social change began with “the subjugation of Khasi chiefs to the British rule has had its consequences on the traditional political system while Christianity on its part brought in tremendous changes through evangelisation and all activities associated with this” (Mawrie, 2009,176).

The conditional laws theory of social change suggests that change begins to take place when circumstances in society begin to change. “The arrival of the British with their western culture brought a lot of influences on the Khasi culture itself” (ibid., 182). The Khasis were exposed to a broader social setting, the exclusiveness ended and the traditional fortifications plunged away. Christianity came along with the colonisers, with the plan of evangelisation which they achieved by providing modern education and health care facilities. According to B.C. Allen, “children came early under the influence of Christian thought and principles as a consequence of schools being in the missionaries hands. This facilitated conversion among the young ones” (cited in Mawrie, 2009, 183). The outcome of the process of evangelisation was it debilitated the traditional religion *Niam Khasi* or *Niam Tynrai*.

Narratives of people are indicative of the fact over a period of time Khasi society most certainly has undergone transformation, and the causes for the change are varied. In the context of the matrilineal set-up, the gusts of change have been resilient.

2.4.1 Influence of Christian Mission and Other Factors

The Khasis were among the first groups of the Northeastern region to have faced the evangelists, whereby the progression of proselytisation has had a riotous impact on Khasi life and culture. Today 74.59 percent (Census 2011) Khasis follow Christianity of different denominations, and the Christian population is ever increasing.

The Charter Act of 1813, paved the way for the protestant missionaries to preach the gospel in India and the Serampore Baptist Mission, a division of the London Baptist Society was the first to reach the Khasi Hills. The coming of William Carey,

a Baptist missionary from England in Calcutta on 11th November 1793, marked the commencement of Christian Mission activity in Northeast India.

In 1818, Carey established the Serampore College in Bengal to train Indians to carry forward missionary activity. After staying for 7 years in Bengal, he was successful in converting the first Hindu named Krishna Chandra Pal on 28th December 1800. Krishna Chandra Pal went on to become the first missionary among the Khasis, thus, Pal's conversion is considered by many as the opening point of the study of the dawn of Christianity among the Khasis. Not much headway was made by this mission. It was towards the end of 1837 that the mission was abandoned in the Khasi hills, post the amalgamation of the Serampore mission with the Baptist Missionary society.

On 22nd June 1841, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission arrived in the hills with the arrival of Rev. Thomas Jones and his wife. The missionaries focused on adopting the Roman script as the script for the Khasis, since the Khasis did not till then have a script of their own. This way the gospel was introduced, soon English education became the preferred way to modernise the masses and three schools were established in Mawsmal, Mawmluh and Cherrapunjee.

The Welsh reformers introduced an austere kind of Christianity (Welsh Methodist Mission) later known as Presbyterianism. They disseminated virtues like austerity, hard work and thrift aimed at improving the condition of the Welsh. This brand of Christianity was also introduced among the Khasis, for they saw a picture of themselves 100 years back. This austere practice of Christianity led to disparage many of the traditional practices of the Khasis. Many practices were considered superstitions and demon worship and newly convert Khasis were strictly not allowed to even witness traditional ceremonies like the dances. This was a period of sharp divide, suspicion and enmity thrived between converts and *Niam Khasi* followers, clan and *Shnong* owing to conversion.

Also, the story of Jubilee Shullai from Jowai is known to all who had to face major problems in the community post conversion. Jowai region in the Jaintia Hills, till date maintains the divide, in the pattern of the localities (*Shnong*), the Christian

localities are called *Shkur*, and the non-Christian localities are called *Shnong*, informed 41 year old Teresa Kharpuri.

Case 1

The initial phase of the mission work was slow, the break through took place in 1846, when two Khasis were baptised. Followed by the conversion of the first female, Ka Nabon of Cherrapunjee, in 1848, who was completely ostracised, she went through great tribulation because of adopting Christianity. In 1850 the first Christian marriage was solemnised. Reportedly, members of the Khasi chiefs (*Syiems*) family also converted. One famous case was that of U Borsing who was to become chief, but since he did not renounce Christianity he lost the right to be chief and his property was impounded.

Initially when Christianity came in, women who converted, were not allowed to inherit the property, and there were moments of resistance. As the demographic patterns have changed to a substantial Christian population, there was a reluctant and realistic acceptance of Christianity and the hardline positioning has changed reasoned Janet Sawkmie aged 56. She also said that, “there of course was resistance between the ‘Us’ and the ‘Other’, because question of shared customs, historical ties are important elements of the construction of ethnicity. But over a period of time, this resistance began to sublimate and social attitudes began to change as more number of people embraced Christianity”.

These historical examples are still afresh in the minds of people as they recount the events that unfurled as conversion began in the state.

- a. ***Ka Khadduh*** - Against this backdrop, this study finds that one of the most significant cultural modifications in the Khasi matriliney is the modernisation of the Khasi family structure. Traditionally it was the *Khadduh* who was the custodian of family property. The position of women especially the *Khadduh* is being adjusted in individual family according to a given situation. Also there is a rise in cases where the youngest daughter moves out for better education and career prospects. In such cases the sister next in line or any sister who is ready to take charge is assigned the duties.

It should be known that the *Khadduh* along with the property also inherits family liabilities. She is responsible for ailing family members, cannot sell any part of ancestral property without the consent of the maternal uncle. So the position of the *Khadduh*, has been over romanticised, and her role is certainly undergoing change argued Dondor Khongtiang who is in his late 50s. If one looks at the role of the *Khadduh* she is only a nominal head and has no rights; but just because she is the youngest she has to accept the responsibility of the family. This argument is also corroborated by scholars who opine that “conversion to Christianity has rendered obsolete the traditional role of the *Khadduh* (youngest daughter) who is supposed to be the guardian of the rites and ceremonies of the *Kpoh* like the internment of the bones in the clan ossuary and the ceremonies connected with this. So also kinship practices that are allied to religion were also lost” (Mawrie, 2009, 182).

Analysis of the field narratives also revealed that people feel Christianity is a movement and not simply a religion. The impact Christianity has had on the political and socio-cultural life of a community is immeasurable “for better or for worse, no one will deny that Christianity has been one of the most powerful agents of social change in Northeast India” (Karotemprel, 2009, 51).

- b. **Uncle-Father Continuum** - As discussed earlier, a Khasi man has dual duty, he is responsible for two families, his natal home and the family he marries into. A feature of matrilineal societies in which “the natural/biological and cultural/social unity of a man is divided and separated. He becomes a split personality” (Kharkrang, 2012, 48). It is this idiosyncrasy that creates the pressure and crisis in a society.

Conventionally, the role of the man as the maternal uncle was pre-eminent and overtakes the biological father. Caring and preserving the welfare of the members of a matrilineal group was an important role of maternal uncle (*Kni*). He is also considered to be the spiritual and moral chaperon for his sisters' children and in certain cases even helps them monetarily if the need arises. In marriage consultations, *Kni* is the main spokesperson between the two families. Fundamentally, the dignity and uprightness of the *Kur* sets on the maternal uncle.

Kni is the cultural father for his nieces and nephews. But with the change in belief system, the role of the man as the father of the family, who is responsible for the welfare of his wife and children is gaining prominence. A Khasi man is no longer a nominal head in the household but has decision making powers for his family. In current times with the rapid emergence of the nuclear family, the role of uncle is becoming negligible.

It is further argued that marriages have become inviolable post the advent of Christianity, leading to the desertion of the practice of a visiting husband. This has made the man more responsible as a husband and father; women no longer need the brother for support and the maternal uncle is being relegated. Scholars opine that modernisation and proselytisation has subverted the matrilineal system which is the essential element of the Khasi social edifice.

A church leader of the Catholic denomination further opined that changes are occurring for example, the power center is shifting. Earlier it was the maternal uncle who was the all in all, but now the father is taking the responsibility. Matriliney principle is the same, only shift in power and authority to the father is occurring. Owing to biblical teachings the role of Khasi men in their families is changing, for bible teaches that the father is the head of the family. Christianity believe does have an influence, though it is not an aim of the church.

- c. **Residence** - Matrilocal residence has always been a key in defining Khasi matriliney, since in the bygone times the concept of marriage was not very distinct. A man was mostly considered to be a visiting husband, males were considered as *Rang She Khadar Lama* (male launch 12 flag), he could move in anyplace and procreate with anyone. With the coming of Christianity, cohabitation became a taboo and marriages were considered sacrosanct. Thereby, putting an end to such a practice and reinforcing the family system. Though many people disregard this fact, it cannot be ignored that in one form Khasis did have acceptance for polygamy, opined 35 year old Banteinam Rynjah.

With regards to matriliney, changes are also being noticed in the residence pattern, matrilineal residence is going through a transition phase. Elder daughters move out, the youngest daughter in many cases is studying or working outside, or married to non-Khasi etc., so someone else steps in from the last to the next. There is no fixed rule as to who can take charge, but the arrangement is gaining popularity and is an accepted culture today.

Married couples also prefer to set up separate houses provided they can afford it. Many also live outside the state for work purpose, so the whole idea of matrilineal residence is in transition. This trend is more prevalent in the urban spaces, and residents of rural spaces opine that matrilineal residence even to this day ensures the elderly are taken care of even if their own children no longer live with them.

- d. **Inheritance** – Conventionally, the property is handed down along the mother's line and women are the custodians of property among the Khasis. An exception is prevalent among the War Khasis who customarily to pass on property to male or female children in equal portions. But in general the inheritance pattern among the Khasis has also been changing, in which land holding clans have begun to convert ancestral property to private property. Similarly those who own land let boys inherit property equally with the daughters. And this practice is gaining momentum among Khasis in general. But the fundamental question is how many Khasi clans are land holding clans, only a very few. If everyone begins to follow this practice it will prove fatal for the matrilineal structure. The existing inheritance structure provides some financial and social security to the women. But with a change of perspective towards matriliney, people are beginning to question every arrangement that the ancestors so thoughtfully had established, argued 67 year old Daribha Passah.

Several other respondents too echoed the same opinion and stated that prior to the advent of modernisation, urbanisation and Christianity, people had faith in the matrilineal system. But today people prefer to look for flaws in the system and

ignore the inherent flexibility and vivacity it has, which has helped it to stand the test of time.

Although the Khasis were exposed to Hindu influence from early history due to their regular interaction with Hindu kingdoms in the plains, yet Hinduism has never really made way into the Khasi society. It was Christianity which had the biggest influence on the Khasis. With the Christianization of the Khasis many of their religious beliefs were greatly transformed and religious affiliation shifted from the traditional Khasi religion to the new religion. Thus the religious world-view underwent a total change. (Mawrie, 2009, 182)

Many respondents opined that, on the foundation of faith, Christianity has generated a process of fragmentation of the Khasi society. The first missionaries described the people of the Khasi hills as 'heathen', 'pagan' etc. and that it was their task to enlighten the people, make them civilised through their mission. The Khasis who used to acknowledge one Khasi religion, are today principally divided into religious groups, Christian and *Niam Khasi*. These groups are often seen at loggerheads with each other. The undercurrents of tension has always been prevalent and some changes have taken place in the matrilineal set-up though not only because of Christianity but also because of exposure to westernisation, intermingling with other communities etc. stated Wanraplang Khongwir aged 39.

Case 2

A Presbyterian Church leader opined matriliney of today is apocryphal. Family comprised of mother, children and maternal uncle on whom all authorities were vested upon; when a boy got married he only went for the night, he is called a visiting husband. But this system of visiting husband is diminishing since people want stability in the family and expect the husband to be home. It is the *Khadduh* that gained prominence that characterised the matriliney of today which also is witnessing change. Simultaneously the role of the father has come to the fore. In the beginning of the century questions began to be raised as to who is the main

authority in the family, prior to which there was some sort of ambiguity, but now father is considered the head and uncle recedes to the background. The father comes in day to day affair, for the *Synshar* (family matters) and uncle comes in for *Bichar* (judgement or decision) if there is trouble. It was established that *Khadduh* in consent with maternal uncle should decide on property matters but many cases have been reported wherein the *Khadduh* takes the decision at own free will.

It is also indicated that there is no big difference between how matriliney is seen and practiced by converts and *Niam Khasi* followers. But the only difference being Christianity stresses on the role/power of the father while in *Niam*, it's the maternal uncle who is the authority, but his role is getting sidelined. In the transition stages where the role of the uncle is becoming less and the role of the father is becoming greater as the real head of the family. Father as the head of the family, is preached by Christianity and is strictly followed by Christians. Many opine that this too could be a factor in propagating the idea of patriliney.

In *Niam Khasi* household, the husband can stay in the wife's house and for one year he doesn't need to feed the children and people do not find it problematic. Though with the passing of time the role of father is coming up though maternal uncle is needed in ceremonies etc. Furthermore, it is a burgeoning feeling that Khasi matrilineal set-up is good but the need is for the people to understand the role of the men in the families, though customarily men possess actual authority in matters of administration etc., but within family the role of father needs to be strengthened.

2.4.2 Riposte from Rural Quarters

A question that ascends is that - are the notable changes that are taking place within the Khasi matriliney restricted to only the urban spaces. Upon interaction with resident of four villages regarding the contemporary scenario of matriliney in the villages primarily, few common dictums that emerged are:

1) Matriliney is the lifeline of the Khasi society even to this day and rural based people believe that it will continue to be so. Scholars in due course of time have also rejected the theory that matriliney is prone to disintegration. "Important exponents of this viewpoint are Elizabeth Colson (1980), who carried out intensive

research in the Plateau Tonga, Karla Poewe (1981), who worked on the Luapula of Zambia, and Leela Dube (1996) who conducted research on the Lakshadweep Island. These scholars maintain that stability of the family and the kinship domain is associated with women, not with men who are primarily dictated by the economic motive” (cited in Nongbri, 2000, 363).

2) Christianity has pervaded their lives in many different ways and just like the urban areas, even in the rural areas many traditional practices have been given up. It was also brought to light that more and more individuals opted for conversion, believing that Christian ideologies could solve the problems that Khasi men face in contemporary times. Similar argument is also put forth by Karla Poewe in the book, *Matrilineal Ideology: Male-Female Dynamics in Luapala, Zambia*, where it is stated that there was a sharp polarity between the Luapula women and men over matrilineal philosophy. That men are ruled by ideals of individuality and their limited access to resources makes men see matrilineality as an encumbrance. Women conversely, use the wealth to assist their matrikin, thus, strengthening values of collaboration with the uterine. Also, owing to weak marriage links, women preferred to maintain strong ties with the uterine for support.

3) When it comes to matrilineality, the rudiments till date remain the same but changes are also seeping in the life of the rural people. “When we were young we never thought we could live away from our mother’s house, but now children are going away. We cannot stop them, first it is education, then work and later, if they find a partner, they make their choices. If we had facilities in the villages, may be then such problems would not arise”, argued 55 year old Daphibet Khyriem.

When questioned about the principles of matrilineality, most of the respondents narrated the following which they believed are the core philosophies of the Khasi matrilineal set-up:

- i. *Long Jait Na Ka Kynthei* - from the women sprang the clan.
- ii. *U Kpa Uba Ai Ka Long Rynieng* - stature and form to the child is provided by the father.

iii. *Ka Kmie Kaba Ai Ia Ka Doh Ka Snam* - flesh and blood to the child is provided by the mother.

iv. *Tip Kur Tip Kha* - know your maternal (*Kur*) and paternal (*Kha*) kinfolks.

They also reinstated the idea that if people both in rural and urban areas believe and understand these principles, then matrilineal set-up will withstand the changes. Change is inevitable but people should not lose faith in the age old system which is also a representation of Khasi identity.

It also came to light there are many families more so in the urban areas where one of the spouse is a follower of *Niam Khasi* and the other a Christian. The respondent reasoned that though people do not articulate it in public but there exists tinge of tension, where the pressure to convert prevails and there is clash of belief system and practices. Many people though converts want to hold matriliney for it helps the society to sustain even if with some moderation, expressed 67 year old Donbok Marwein. He also said that in the villages, people try to follow some of the traditional practice but it is fading away fast. He said rituals associated with the *Niam* are time consuming, tedious and require the expertise of knowledgeable person. In today's time people do not have the time to invest, everyone doesn't have the money and once the older generation is gone very few would be aware about the specificities of rituals. For the Christians on the other hand, it is simple for the church takes care of all its ritualistic necessities and this has had an influence on the small population of *Niam Khasi* followers.

Responding along the same framework, few more respondents from the villages argued that there is a rising trend of people opting for burial even among *Niam* followers. Since cremating a deceased involves a lot of rituals and many cannot also afford it. Thus, owing to the economic factor as well, some *Kur* choose to bury. Hence, many clans have done away with these practices, for practical concerns but, at large it affects the identity that Khasis have as a matrilineal community.

Post cremation bones have to be kept in clan ossuary called *Ka Mawshyieng*, which is a transitory storehouse for the bones and then the bones have to be shifted to the permanent clan ossuary called *Ka Mawba*. In case of unnatural death, the rituals are

different to do away with bad omen. Collection of bones after cremation is a very important practice. Bones are stored by the clan, if the bones for instance of a husband is still kept with the wife, she cannot remarry. If something of this sort happens then another ritual called *Ki Niya Jing Sadh* (ritual for adultery) is conducted. So many clans have done away with these practices. In doing away some rituals or simplifying them, one could say that impact of Christianity is there, though it is not accepted but it is an underlying fact, articulated 78 year old Teilang Basaiawmoit. Scholars have also stated that “the centrality of the megalithic rituals connected with the bone collection and internment ceremonies into the *Mawbah*, in the religious life of the Khasi-Jaintia people, is lined with the idea that the *Mawbah* symbolizes their identity and continuity as a group” (Mawlong, 2009, 196).

Rituals are a part of the Khasi way of life and with the changes it does affect the social life. Is religion and culture different, is difficult to demarcate, but faith does have a bearing on the life of the people. Christian or even Muslim Khasis certainly won't carry out the practices that *Niam Khasi* followers do. These rituals are vital for sustaining the Khasi social order and solidity in the society, argued Dapborlang Pariat aged 49.

Case 3

From the narratives, it is also learnt that Seng Khasi organises Sunday gatherings to teach children indigenous values and *Niam Khasi* philosophies. Supporters of *Niam Khasi* opine that Sunday is the only day when children can be brought together since people are comparatively free to spend time on such activities. Some orate that this practice has been motivated by the Sunday school that churches conduct. Post the dawn of Christianity, there is a conflict as to how people look at the traditional practices. For instance, conventionally Khasi believes in the legend of the *Lum Sophetbeneng* and Christianity talks about the Garden of Eden, so what does a Khasi believe in? The question that arises is, is Khasi identity intrinsic to *Niam Khasi*? Those who believe in it would say it is intrinsic, but this believe is not explicit. It is a complex situation, identity crisis of sorts. Christianity has had an influence on *Niam Khasi*, rituals have been simplified if not done away, but the

sanctity of it remains. *Niam Khasi* is not an organised religion, it is localised and clan based more of a *Niam Iing*. But over the years, move has been there to make it organised modeling along the line of Christianity. For instance - *Jing Ya Seng* is a meeting of *Niam Khasi* followers which they hold regularly a system that never existed earlier. In the *Seng Kut Snem* festival that is held annually, the *Phawars* that are sung are cryptic and many a times filled with anti-Christian content. The study also found that few years ago that in one such celebration a play was staged which parody Christ, which had become a controversy.

At all points through the history of conversion in the Khasi hills - Khasi culture, *Niam Khasi* and Christianity have been at crossroads, which has had a bearing on matriliney. The converts opine that being a Khasi by birth implies that one has adopted the cultural nuances of the community and adheres to them in the course of life. While one's religious faith is a private matter and does not impede culture in any way. Whereas followers of *Niam Khasi* reiterate that Khasi socio-cultural philosophies have never been in isolation from the indigenous faith, one sustains the other. The dichotomy whether religion and culture are separate entities or are they correlated has always existed in the Khasi society. It is essential to note that Khasi culture is rooted in the indigenous faith, *Niam Khasi*. It is considered to be a clan based religion that also defines the matrilineal ethos followed by the Khasis. The tenets of *Niam Khasi* are embedded in the everyday practices and has never been considered a singular entity. It is part and parcel of Khasi worldview, code of conduct and culture at large. Only with the advent Christianity, did the Khasis think of religion as a separate phenomenon and the need to preserve it was felt strongly.

2.4.3 Assertion for Patriliney

Another uproar that has been challenging the Khasi matriliney over more than two decades is the demand for patriliney. Two groups primarily have been championing the cause of patriliney among other demands.

- I. *Mait Shaphrang* movement is carried out by a group of Khasi men who propagate the use of fathers' surnames and also demand for the equal division of ancestral property and self-acquired property, between sons and

daughters. There is a common phrase that is used to refer to a man in the wife's house, *U Khun Ki Briew* (child of another person), which is a signifier of the idea that a man remains an outsider in the wife's home, though he is loved and respected. Also post-marriage, he has no share in the parent's property, which is primarily due to the unequal system of inheritance prevalent among the Khasis. It is on this premise that *Mait Shaphrang* movement has been advocating the cause of patriliney and equal inheritance system. *Mait Shaphrang* supporters argue that the Khasi man fundamentally possesses nothing which makes it tough for them to earn respect in the wife's house.

Traditionally an unmarried man is expected to contribute all his income to his parents' home called *Kamai Nongkhyrrow*, which leaves him with no savings, consequently this puts them at a weak position. In houses where there are no sons the idea of equal inheritance does not arise, but in households with both sons and daughters, this matter is of utmost relevance, reason the supporters of this movement. Further, it is argued that the customary isolation of Khasi men from the resources has placed the state in an unfavourable place within the larger social and eco-political structure. Suggestive of the idea that matrilineal lineage is inapropos for economic productivity.

- II. *Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai* (SRT) came into existence on 14th April 1990, with the motto *La Jait Bynriew Ban Kyntiew* (to uplift the Khasi community). SRT came in as a successor to the organisation *Ka Seng Iktiar Longbriew Manbriew* which around 1961 strongly supported the modification both in lineage and rights of succession though the demands did not make much progression. The prime aim of SRT as per its Constitution is to initiate a complete change over to a patrilineal system. It finds anchorage on the catchphrases such as *Pyniadei Ka Dustur Jong Ngi Bad Jingkylla Ka Por* (custom ought to amend along with changing times). Members of the SRT are of the opinion that the Khasi customs have no relevance in contemporary world and it also makes Khasi men

irresponsible. Thereby, it is imperative to capacitate the men which is only possible through new initiatives.

The fundamental objective of SRT:

- (a) To make the man capable as the father and head of the family so that he can shoulder full responsibility of his wife and children, along with the assistance of his wife.
- (b) Lineage to be followed from fathers line and property to be divided among all children. Conversely, daughters who marry outside the Khasi community have to forfeit their right to inheritance.
- (c) The sons are to take responsibility of ill and aged parents.

A 32 year old Lurshai Nongkhlaw stated that this movement also gained prominence owing to the loophole in the Meghalaya Succession to Self-Acquired Property (Khasi and Jaintia Special Provision) Act 1984, which does not allow the distribution of ancestral property, though it permits the distribution of self-acquired property. Also, the members of SRT felt that Meghalaya Succession to Self-Acquired Property (Khasi and Jaintia Special Provision) Act 1984 was baseless since the government failed to formally implement it, just like the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896, which paved way for the Nairs changing the age old matrilineal joint family system through legislation.

Pro-changers also draw in their arguments from past evidences and argue that if Khasi Christians could give up the idea of *Kamai Iing Kur* (property acquired while living with his clan) and accept *Kamai Iing* (property earned by an individual). And if Kerala could usher in social change through legislations, then there is no reason that the Khasis cannot do the same.

Both *Mait Shaphrang* and *Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai* (SRT) have been active with their movements but people opine that the movements have been restricted to the urban spaces and failed to infiltrate in the rural spaces. These movements do not talk about gender equity. They are by and large male oriented laying emphasis only on the privileges of the Khasi men. It is felt that the age of Khasi men as fathers has emerged and man feel the need to dispense his duty more as a husband and

father, rather than maternal uncle. “His universe has changed location. His home where he is with the wife and children is his world. The dignity of man consists in being a father, and his authority derives from that dignity” (Kharkrang, 2012, 137).

A septuagenarian male opined there are very few takers of the concepts propounded by the movements more so in rural areas. Also that equality in inheritance is a matter of concern for those who own land because not all the people own land. Traditionally property was assigned to the women for it was considered that the women are weaker and men can manage on their own. So inheritance through female line was a means of giving protection to the women.

Other respondents also narrated that Khasis do not differentiate between a boy and a girl; there is no favouritism of gender at the time of child birth, unlike many communities who prefer a male child. Education and other opportunities are provided equally to both boys and girls. The impact of these movements is miniscule. Can anyone clearly demarcate which year would be taken as cutoff to start patriliney, will the paternal clan accept the new members is a question. These are questions nobody answers, the movement is more among the literates in the city, and people in the villages are strongly traditional. “The convener of *Mait Shaphrang* movement, Michael N. Syiem, toes the line, customs and traditions should change with the passage of time” (Kharkrang, 2012, 138).

Internal questioning has begun in the Khasi society; both matriliney and patriliney are in crisis. People also reason that such debates are healthy, since it is essential for a community to retrospect from time to time. Many people also argue that more than biblical teachings economic factor pushes the idea of patriliney. Also, women’s condition in the Khasi society is appalling, and the social position of Khasi women is no different from women in other community. The case of domestic violence, rape are on the rise in the state and whatever social security Khasi women have owing to matriliney that will also dwindle if patriliney is adopted.

It is evident that the people, more so in the cities have been preoccupied over the idea of patriliney. Many respondents reasoned that patriliney debate takes place in cities, while rural area rejects it, for they uphold matriliney. It is also felt that

matriliny is misunderstood, essentially matriliny talks about sharing of gender roles. Men do not have material appendage but as fathers and uncles they make policy decisions, chart out community rules though women inherit property. Khasi men are given higher status in the society since authority is vested on them, conversely *Khadduh* inherits assets along with the family liabilities. This fact is largely ignored while discussing Khasi matriliny. So patriliney debate is unsubstantiated, because many men do realise that property goes to the one ready to take additional responsibilities. Also, women have no access to the *Dorbar Shnong* (traditional administrative system) though that is being fought against now.

Christianity potentially assists in harbouring the idea of patriliney. But it is not the main reason since even Christians are unwilling to convert to patriliney because it would bring about lot of confusion in the Khasi society like incest and so forth. Despite the fact that majority of the people follow Christianity, people do not want to move out of matriliny.

Case 4

A church leader of the Catholic denomination narrated that he has been trained in Christian theology for years but yet he thinks like a Khasi, his worldview, philosophy hasn't changed and that wouldn't change. Even the mere mention of changing to patriliney is disturbing to the mind, since matriliny is central to Khasi life. The mental makeup is still the Khasi mental structure. Patriliney movement came out from a sense of ownership where Khasi men are in a disadvantaged position. For example, bank gives loan against some property or asset, but Khasi men have nothing to show. It is an outcome of this practical need. The economic drivers are strong in the movement for patriliney, also from the realisation that Khasi men shrug off responsibility and if lineage is given to the men they would be more accountable. There is not much impact though it is picking up now, if the whole system has to be changed and it is very challenging. In rural areas, there is no impact. There are some who adopt the father's title but again the concept *Sang* has to be dealt with. Matrilineal system is scientific as well where incest is avoided and the gene pool is maintained. So also, Christianity permits marriage only in third

generation in the same clan, but church does not allow it in Meghalaya for it follows the clan exogamy system.

Having stated the above it is reasoned that in a world where the Khasis are a minority, Christianity veritably acts as a platform for upholding the Khasi identity. In the midst of strong culture, no weak culture has ever survived globally. Thus, Christianity has not taken away culture from the people, it has rather enhanced it. The deeper aspect of culture like philosophy, world view which is internal has remained, external factors like dress etc. has changed, but Christianity has no role in it as such. Khasi matriliney is facing threat; people see the benefits of patriliney and are fighting to adopt it. If the Khasi society succumbs to such movement than it will take time for its actual implementation. But there is no denying that a strong wave is there and Khasi society too is vulnerable. The church feels that if it has survived then matriliney is a good, a logical system and the underlying principal is practical. There are only individual opinions within the church; the church at the core is concerned about the society at large.

The Catholic Church mixes well with the culture and other conservative churches have started to follow the same. When a new religion is embraced one does not loose ones culture, religion is a belief system whereas culture is day-to-day practice like language, blood, food habits etc. Adjustments has to be made with traditional rituals, people feel they are Khasis even if they do not follow the rituals. Both religions can go parallel, the clan system is still preserved, it's a question of blending in. The virginity of blood is necessary to a Khasi *Ka Snam Te Ka Snam*, but religion can be changed just like a uniform.

Matriliney is an institution without rights and it is here that the crisis in matriliney arises, creating a consideration for patriliney. Also, the new generation is participating in the global parade in a competitive culture and economy which brings in consciousness about the economic opportunities within the state. It became apparent that the inherent flaws within matriliney have started the patriliney movement and the focus is on the economic aspect. There hasn't been much impact

of the movement by SRT or *Mait Shaphrang*; it is restricted to the town and not in the rural areas where possibly clan system is very strong especially.

A large section of the respondents also reasoned that the existence of many societies within the larger Khasi society has contaminated the unique cultural core. And the challenges faced by matriliney can be dealt with if women start talking in terms of rights rather than duties; then matriliney can gain its foothold again.

There are certain basic elements in culture which we may call, the 'core of culture' which sustain the life of the community in the course of its history. This core of culture is the constant aspect of culture and it ascertains the integrity of a group of people. When this constant gets influenced and changes then we experience a loss of culture. The Khasi society at present is experiencing a lot of cultural changes at the peripheral level (dress code, food habit, lifestyle) etc. However, there are alarming signs that some core elements of Khasi culture are also getting affected (Mawrie, 2009, 186-87).

The narratives schematically bring forth the crisis that is being faced by the Khasi matrilineal system in the current era. Influences or factors are many and it is problematic to segregate any one as the primary. What is emergent is the fact that there are changes that are taking place. Then there are changes where certain groups want to further induce and the populace in both the rural and urban areas are deliberating upon the winds of change hovering over the Khasi society. It has also been seen that in the process of meeting mainstream modernisation, there is the emergence of two views in the Khasi society "one, looking back at its vibrant tribal tradition seeking inspiration in its music, dance, folklore and poetry which have sufficed to express its unique identity. The other, looking ahead in apprehension, calls for a stronger response to change, a renewal of its political, economic and social institutions" (Bareh, 1989, 97). The highlight being regardless of the opposing views, both draw virtuosity from tribal knowledge and understand the prominence of ethnic identity, which becomes the common ground for both. Correspondingly, not all folk facets of a community experience change at the same

time, it is cohesive to the group where “the core traits of a culture are more resistant to disintegrating forces than the peripheral ones” (Das, 1962, 221).

2.5 Summation

It is challenging to map all of the changes and continuity of Khasi matriliney in one study, but some essential observations are summarised as below:

- i. 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 perpetrated the philosophy of the *Kpoh* (womb) and the *Iing* which is the matrilineal unit.
- ii. When it comes to authority, there is a scuffle concerning possession and authority. For instance, females are in custody of the property but the authority over the use and sale of the property lies with the male (maternal uncle and in the new circumstances, the father).
- iii. Emblematically *Ka 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 custodian of ancestral property with conditions, albeit unwritten and unspoken” (Mukhim, 2009, 44). The role and position of *Ka Khadduh* is no longer sacrosanct and the gusts of change are proliferating.
- iv. 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. The father has a reputable position in the family, the Khasis believe in the saying - *U Kpa Uba Lah Ban Iai, U Kni Uba Tang Ha Ka Iap Ka Im*, which may be translated as the father who supports everything and the maternal uncle comes in times of life and death. “The Khasi father is revered not only when living, but also death as *U Thawlang*, and special ceremonies are performed to propitiate his shade” (Gurdon, 2012, 79). Owing to cultural alteration, the role of *Kni* is being overshadowed by the *Kpa*, increasingly like never before.

- v. In matters related to residence, though people at large still continue to follow the matrilineal residence system, there are substantial number of people opting for nuclear families. Herein, the focus is also on the struggle for a man to balance his life post-marriage where in current times the role of man as a husband and father is gaining prominence; he has authority over his conjugal family.
- vi. 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, the conflict arises between two groups of successors - a man's children on one side and his nephews/nieces on the other. The problem also arises with matters related to ancestral property and self-acquired, wherein division of ancestral property is customarily not permitted. Several disputes are reported with matters concerning property that are governed by customary laws. People opt to approach formal organisations for justice and grievance remedied; many such cases are pending in the courts. Certain groups within the Khasi community are also of the opinion that because of land ownership which is the prerogative of the women folk, Khasi men have an underprivileged economic position. Thus, they are incapable of partaking in modern economic ventures, for example for availing bank loans, land or real estate is the legitimate warranty.
- vii. In the Khasi society, the position of the *Khadduh* is consecrated to an extent but a wave of discontent is omnipresent. For many believe that owing to inter-community marriages, Khasi women are trading off custodial privileges to non-Khasis, who eventually become owners of land and business.

The Khasi society, which till date is sustaining its matrilineal culture, is combating with numerous challenges that has necessitated a process of self-evaluation and revisitation of the traditions, decrees and customary laws. Scholars are also of the opinion that there are structural flaws in matrilineality; so also in the Khasi matrilineal

system. Nakane states that “the complexity of the matrilineal system is a decided handicap when it comes to resisting radical economic changes. This may be the reasons for the rapid disintegration or instability of social organisation of matrilineal peoples in the world” (cited in War, 1998, 26).

In case of the Khasis too, economy appears to be one of the key challengers to matrilineality, and the society is increasingly becoming disposed to social changes. Poewe believes that “the contradiction between the increasingly social nature of the forces of production and the still private character of appropriation creates the material conditions for the disappearance of the system” (ibid., 26).

Also, the influence of modern education on the Khasi society is tremendous, it has led to the appearance of an educated erudite group who have remarkable influence on the Khasi society. Education also led to the formation of assemblages of professionals, officials and technocrats among the Khasis. In the present times, this has given a better sense of individuality to the men and women which is in sharp contrast to the customary practice of clan camaraderie, sharing of assets and cooperation in any social activity.

Another positive effect of education according to Alexander Lish was that education “broke the seals which so long kept them (the Khasis) from invaluable stores of knowledge. Education has also initiated a critical evaluation of the traditional system in the light of modern development. The matrilineal system and the law of inheritance have of late come into sharp criticism by the cultural groups” (cited in Mawrie, 2009, 184-185).

The argument in this chapter again has been developed in the light of symbolic interactionist perspective. That people have developed an understanding about matrilineality based on their everyday social interaction. This also helps in the process of developing a sense about one self, one’s own identity and the larger social milieu. The continuous process of interaction and interpretation, aids in the recognition of roles each individuals have in a society, be it as a father, maternal uncle or *Khadduh*. On the one hand, this enables a person to conform to social norms and modes of behaviour. And on the other, through the very same course of interaction and

interpretation, people engage in questioning the established beliefs and shared norms of the society. Symbolic interactionists like Mead and others have maintained that the internalisation of role, identities, principles and meanings in turn reproduces society. Interactionist argue that, both self and society rely on the same course of social interaction by which realities are produced and continuously negotiated (Gecas, 1982).

In a broader context, modification in social associations is social change. In this light, social change is a ubiquitous occurrence in any society, in which processes of change have an impact on the social structure as a result, the existing structure may be sustained, or modified. Khasi society too is in the process of social change, the impact of which is to be seen, whether it will sustain the matrilineal structure or completely change it.

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