

Matrilineal societies

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Sociologyindex, SociologyBooks 2011, Matrilineal Descent, Patrilineal Descent Matrilineal societies are those societies in which descent is traced through mothers rather than through fathers. In matrilineal societies, property is often passed from mothers to daughters and the custom of matrilineal residence may be practiced. In matrilineal societies, the descendants of men are their sister's children and not their own, who belong to their mother's matrilineage. Matrilineage is sometimes associated with polyandry or group marriage where women have a variety of sexual partners and lines of male descent are uncertain.

Ancient societies are known to have recognised matrilineal descent. Matrilineality is not the mirror image of patrilineality. Matrilineal societies differ from both patrilineal and bilateral societies in that the institution of marriage tends to be, relatively weak (Schneider and Gough 1961, Goode 1963). In a gerontocratic matrilineal society, women's influence and prestige tended to increase with age and were usually expressed in informal settings, although there were offices of formalised informality such as "mothers" of matrilineages.

Matrilineality required the subordination of marriage and conjugal duties to loyalty to and participation in the descent group. This, combined with economic activities, farming, artisan work, and trading, gave women considerable independence. Women (like elders) had prestige in the matrilineal home town, where black stools symbolised the "seat of power." (Bartle). In a matrilineal society, women generally have a greater autonomy in terms of sexuality and reproduction than their counterparts in male

dominated societies. The woman in a matrilineal society represents the clan and her children carry on the name of her clan.

Land Inheritance and Schooling in Matrilineal Societies: Evidence from Sumatra - Agnes R. Quisumbing, and Keijiro Otsuka Abstract: This paper explores statistically the implications of the shift from communal to individualized tenure on the distribution of land and schooling between sons and daughters in matrilineal societies, based on a Sumatracase study. The inheritance system is evolving from a strictly matrilineal system to a more egalitarian system in which sons and daughters inherit the type of land that is more intensive in their own work effort.

While gender bias is either non-existent or small in land inheritance, daughters tend to be disadvantaged with respect to schooling. The gender gap in schooling, however, appears to be closing for the generation of younger children. - capri. cgiar. org/wp/capriwp14. asp Gough, K. (1961) "The modern disintegration of matrilineal descent groups," in D. M. Schneider and K. Gough (eds.) Matrilineal Kinship, Berkeley, U. Calif. , pp. 631-54 Opong, C. (1974) Marriage Among a Matrilineal Elite, Cambridge University Press. Matrilineal Society in India - Dr.

Madhumita Das When most of the people in the world follow the patrilineal system, there exist a few groups here and there who believed to be the descendants of Japheth (son of Noah), and are followers of the matrilineal system (Syiemlieh, 1994). At the global level, the existence of matrilineal society is found among the tribes of African countries, in some part of Southeast Asia and among three groups of India. It is the Minangkabaus of

West Sumatra, Indonesia, comprising the largest ethnic group in the world who follow a matrilineal system (Tanius, 1983).

In Indian context, the matrilineal social system is found only among small pockets of south the and northeast India. The Nairs and Mappilles in Kerala, the tribal groups of Minicoy Island and the Khasis and the Garos of Meghalaya are the followers of matrilineal system. However, the matrilineal system of the African countries differs considerably from that of the Southeast Asian groups. Even within India, the system differs from one group to another (Kapadia, 1966). Among these groups, difference is mostly observed in the type of residence after marriage.

The pattern of duo-local residence exists among the Ashanti of the Gold Coast in Africa, Minangkchau of Sumatra and the Nayars of Central Kerala. However, the Khasis of Meghalaya, generally follow the residential pattern known as “matrilocal residence”, where the husband resides with his wife's matrilineal kin or in other case couples settle down together in a new residence in and around his wife's maternal place (neo-local residence).

Methodology This work discusses the changes that are occurring among the only few existent matrilineal setup in the world in terms of their attitudes and behaviour.

In order to discuss the changes, the existing literature has been reviewed and they are supplemented by in-depth interviews of a few key informants. The key informants include eminent academicians, elderly persons of different localities, local heads, social workers and persons representing the younger generation. In addition, two focus group discussions (FGD) were

done with women from different age groups. The idea behind this exercise is to clearly identify those features that have been characterising the matrilineal system of the Khasi tribe these days.

Along with the qualitative analysis, the profile of women living in original matrilineal arrangement as against those who have completely transited in the form of percentage distribution is also presented. A few socio-economic, demographic, and developmental characteristics of both women and her husband has been taken into consideration. Lastly, a multivariate analysis has been undertaken to substantiate the findings from bivariate analysis and to find out the factors, which brought changes among the society. Study Area

The basic aim of the study is to understand the structure of matrilineal system and the changes that has taken place in it over the period of time among the Khasis of Meghalaya. In Meghalaya there exists three tribal groups, namely Khasi, Jaintia and Garo. The state is predominantly inhabited by the Khasi tribe, who are known for their matrilineal social system. The sample design adopted was a multistage design, fitted to the study requirements. Given the resources available, it was decided to cover 600 eligible women (currently married Khasi women age 15–49 years), all from (erstwhile) East Khasi Hills district.

The choice of East Khasi Hills over West Khasi Hills was purely purposive. According to 1991 census, little over 33 per cent population of the East Khasi Hills district live in the urban areas. Thus, it was decided to cover 200 eligible women (33 per cent of 600) from the urban areas and the remaining 400

women from the rural areas. The Khasi Matriliney: An Overview The term matriarchy or matriliney has become inseparably associated with the Khasi social organisation since it was first used in 1914 by Gurdon to describe Khasi social customs (Das. Gupta, 1964).

Although the term is used to explain the pattern of residence after marriage among the Khasis, it is, however, known that matrilocal residence is not an invariable concomitant of matriarchal or matrilineal society. As among the Nayers of India, though they are also the followers of matrilineal system, the residential system among them is duolocal, where husband is usually the night visitor to their wife. Before we begin to understand the nature of Khasi social organisation, it becomes necessary, to clear that the general rule of matrilineal system is that females inherit property.

However, it must be noted that at the outset the system of inheritance is governed by some code of rules, which, if taken in its totality and richness, can hardly be described as simple. In fact, the Khasi society is more complex and vivid than what is it apparent. The Khasis have matrilocal residence and matrilineal descent. Participation in the family religion and the common sepulchre, where bones of the members of the family are interred after death, are the two elements that bind the members together.

Besides the matrilocal residential pattern and matrilineal descent, family property is mainly transmitted through the female line. The children of the male do not belong to the family. The youngest daughter, Ka Khadduh, in a Khasi family is in charge of the family religion. She cremates her mother and inters her bones in the common sepulchre (a place where the bones are kept

with a huge stone over it which is different in shape for males and females). Marriage is a great social institution among the Khasis, as it determines the system of matrilineal residential pattern among them (Sinha, 1970).

Being the followers of a unique social system of matrilineality, the Khasi women enjoy a special place of status and dignity (Kyndiah, 1990). A Khasi woman is the guardian and preserver of the family goods. She plays a crucial role in the affairs of the family. However, she is not the head of the family, as this is left to a male member. The father of the family has a definite role to play in the household affairs. However, his role is limited to the final word of the maternal uncle.

When Christianity came, the Khasi family was faced with the question whether a “Ka Khaduh” could hold the family property if she would convert to the Christianity. In 1918, the Government ruled that Christian converts should be allowed to inherit the ancestral property. Property is thus divorced from religion. Though religion was divorced from the traditional rules, because of the modernisation process, such as, educational development along with the spread of Christianity, that had somehow changed the traditional system in many respects (Roy, 1964).

The original system and moral efficacy has now a days been largely distorted (Bareh, 1994). The literature shows that a shift is taking place in the matrilineal society towards parental or patrilineal one (Tanius, 1983; Syiemlieh, 1994). Syiemlieh (1994), in his write-up on the Khasis and their matrilineal system has explained that due to some basic reasons there exists

a transition in the matrilineal set-up in Meghalaya. This transition in the matrilineal society is due to the changes in the overall set-up.

Such changes can be the result of factors like the intermingling with other neighbouring patriarchal communities, the advent of missionaries and spread of Christianity among these tribal groups. The spread of urbanisation and urban development along with the spread of Christianity have changed the perception and attitude of people among the Khasis (Kapadia, 1966; Syiemlieh, 1994). Thus from the above review we get the idea that over time these matrilineal societies are undergoing changes in its characteristics.

On the basis of the above literature, each characteristic feature has been given weightage to categorize the sample women in two groups, viz. , Traditional: Women fulfilling all three criteria or those who possess at least ownership right along with matrilineal residential pattern or matrilineal residential pattern and descent through female. Transitional: Women who follow none of the criteria or only descent. It is found from the above categorisation that 55 per cent of sample women are from the traditional group while the remaining 45 per cent are from the transitional group.

The Traditional women will be referred to as 'traditional women', whereas women in Transitional group will be referred to as 'transitional women'. It may be relevant to mention here that these nomenclatures are used for the purpose of conceptual categorisation of these two groups of women according to their characteristics assessed at the time of survey. Yet another

issue that needs to be kept in mind is that the term ‘ traditional’ is not used as opposed to ‘ modern’.

It may be emphasised that women in traditional group are the followers of all the three or the first two important characteristics of the matrilineal system, i. e. , property ownership right, matrilocal residence and/or family name through mother’s side. Socio-economic and Demographic Characteristics of Women in Matrilineal Set-up Type of Residence Type of residence is one of the important determinants that has its effect on the changes that take place in any society, as well as, on the changing perception of people towards traditions.

Women from traditional group are mostly concentrated in rural areas (79 per cent). What is, however, more interesting is that 21 per cent women following the matrilineal system live in urban areas and also almost half of the women who have deviated from matrilineal system continue to live in rural areas. This indicates that the transition that we witness in Khasi society is a complex phenomenon operating at family level than merely the outcome of urbanisation and modernisation process.