

The role of Khasi women among the Khasi tribe in Meghalaya's Jatah Lakadong village

Joel Lalengliana Darlong^{1*}, Shardin Suting²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Holy Cross College, Mohanpur, Agartala, India

²Assistant Teacher, Our Lady of Holy Cross School, Mohanpur, Agartala, India

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ABSTRACT

The Khasi is an indigenous tribe of Meghalaya who lives in Northeast India. It is a tribe that follows a unique matriarchy. Bachofen (1967), suggested that the early social formation of the family gave more importance to the mother, and for which “government of the state was also entrusted to the women” (Bachofen, 1967, p. 156). In matrilineal societies where the women inherit the property and pass down the generation through the female line. It is important to examine and highlight the role and status of women in Meghalaya. The purpose of the study is to identify the role of the women in family and society as well as their participation in social, political, economic, and religious activities that highlight their importance in society. It's important to examine the gender roles and responsibilities in the traditional matriarchy which bring the changes that have been set in the society and how these changes affect the social structure and the consequences which enhance the role of the women where they were involved according to their capabilities. Due to the prevalence and practice of their indigenous culture, it is perceived that the women experience more freedom and self-reliance. Khasi women witness women's empowerment and raise women's gender equality by their acts in the social, economic, and political realms, demonstrating the value of women in society.

Keywords: Khasi, indigenous tribe, Meghalaya, Northeast India, matriarchy

INTRODUCTION

The past decades have seen a rapidly increasing awareness of the necessity to empower women and bring up gender equality through measures to attain social, economic, political equity and wider access to fundamental rights improvement in basic health and

education. Gender equality and the status of women are low in most countries. Women in India also suffer from a lack of acceptability in the patriarchal society.

The north-east region of India features a multi-ethnic cultural landscape, with the majority of the Khasi tribe living in Meghalaya, although they also have small communities in Assam, Mizoram, and Tripura. Meghalaya has a total population of 2,966,889 out of which 1,491,832 are males and 1,475,057 are females as per details from the census of India 2011. Before the advent of Christian Missionaries, the majority of Khasis practiced their indigenous religion. But at the present time, larger part of Khasis have embraced Christianity. They have not, however, fully abandoned conventional religious ideas and customs. The Khasi tribe is considered to be the first immigrant group from Myanmar, who migrated to India's north-eastern state of Meghalaya, where the majority of Khasi people live. Geographically, the Khasi tribe is not widely spread.

Women in Meghalaya are thought to be in a better position and have more independence than women elsewhere in the country. Khasi women take care of the family, property, and wealth. The mother serves as the agent who binds together the religious faith, traditions, and rituals of the family and society (Kyndiah, 1990 and Bareh, 1997).

Women are revered, acknowledged, and elevated in society. Another element of Meghalayan society is that women are free from many of the social constraints such as caste system, social inequality and untouchability that exist in bigger Indian societies. The Khasi tribe is distinct from the rest of society in that women are vital to the survival of the entire Khasi tribe. This research article will provide some insight into the role of women in Meghalaya's Jatah Lakadong village. The research work was done on Jatah Lakadong villages located in Mawkynrew Block/Subdivision of East Khasi Hills district in Meghalaya, India. It is situated 19 km away from sub-district headquarters Mawkynrew (tehsildar office) and 59 km away from the capital city Shillong. This research is mainly focused on the role played by Khasi women in various areas such as family, society, economy, politics, and religion.

THE OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To understand the role of the Khasi women in the family and society.
2. To study women's participation in socio-economy, politics and religion.
3. To analyze the changes in the social status and role of women.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Nongbri (1994, p. 176), Khasi women are seen as important to the family in Khasi philosophy. Women are in charge of nurturing and carrying on the matrilineal line. The notion that the father provides stature and shape (U Kpa uba ai ia ka long rnyñeng) and the mother provide flesh and blood (Ka kmie ka ba ai ia ka doh ka snam) is deeply ingrained in Khasi human reproduction ideology. In familial and kinship bonds, this bond has been significantly expressed between the mother and the kid.

As Roy (2010, p. 6) points out, status and role are two sides of the same coin, or in other words, they are indistinguishable concepts. Status is a collection of rights and responsibilities that can be articulated through the person. It refers to a person's social position or space. At the same time, a role signifies the changing elements of status. An

individual maintains the social status that has been allocated to him or her and does so in relation to other statuses. When the duties and rights connected with status are put into practise, the individual then executes his or her function.

According to Kyndiah (1990) and Bareh (1997), in comparison with other women in India, women in Meghalaya are believed to be in a better position and have more independence than women elsewhere in the country. It is the mother who serves as the anchor for the family's religious beliefs, practises, and observances.

As Nongkynrih (2005, p. 4), stated that a Khasi village is autonomous and has control over all of its inhabitants, but the control is collectively exercised by a village council (Dorbar Shnong) which is composed of adult male members. The decision-making process excludes women, but they may be consulted occasionally.

Lahoti and Swaminathan (2016) argue that property provided in a woman's name is empowering and can affect the lives of her family and her children. Similarly, Bose (2006, as cited in Deb), in a field survey conducted by Rumi Deb stated that in matrilineal society "As the property rights are in the hands of women, it is but natural that women declare themselves as heads of households during the census operation."

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The research is conducted using both primary and secondary data. Primary sources include field research with descriptive questionnaires, while secondary data includes books, articles, and journals, as well as information gathered from the internet and unpublished works. The village was chosen for the data gathering mostly because it was convenient. The relevant samples are collected using the snowball sampling approach. And also depending on involvement in observation. The research aimed to collect comprehensive and reliable data to address the research objectives effectively.

IN-DEPTH DISCUSSION

a. Profile of Jatah Lakadong village

Jatah Lakadong villages is located in Mawkynrew Block/Subdivision of East Khasi Hills district in Meghalaya, India. It is situated 19 km away from sub-district headquarters Mawkynrew (tehsildar office) and 59 km away from the capital city Shillong. Pincode of Jatah Lakadong village locality is 793015.

The Jatah Lakadong village has a total population of 907 of which 447 are males while 460 are females with 167 houses as per Census of India 2011. As we can see the growth of population in 2022 with a total of 1,283 of which the male population is 643 while the female is 640 with 217 houses which shows the growth of the population in Jatah Lakadong village. Out of 217 households, Jatah Lakadong village has a total number of 20 Katcha houses and 177 Semi pakka houses, and 20 pakka houses.

In Jatah Lakadong there is a PHC called Jatah Public Health Centre (PHC) established on 8th, September 1997. In this Village, most of the families are engaged in agricultural activity, raising animals like piggery, poultry, goats, cows, etc., and also breaking stones for selling. The village was inhabited by eight different clans, namely Nongrum, Suting,

Mukhim, Surong, Mynsong, Lating, Lynshiang and Lawai, who all belong to the Scheduled Tribe category.

b. Role of Khasi women in family and society

Women are the major careers for both young children and the elderly in every country. According to UN, “rural women play a key role in supporting their households and communities in achieving food and nutrition security, generating income, and improving rural livelihoods and overall well-being,” as stated by the United Nations Women’s Watch Organization.

The role that a person plays in a given situation in mother, housewife, daughter-in-law, and sister are all roles played by women. Both within and outside the house, women play a variety of social and economic functions. They share a lot of responsibilities such as running a family, keeping the house in order, attending the farm and caring domestic animals.

The Khasi women are responsible for a variety of familial and kinship tasks. In Khasi culture, the family revolves around the woman. Aside from being the guardian of the family’s property, the Khadduh or youngest daughter, has more difficult responsibility. The family’s youngest daughter inherits the majority of the family’s assets, including the ancestral mansion and other heirlooms and becomes its custodian and trustee. The obligation of caring for and protecting all members of her matri-kin falls on her. If her elder’s parents or other members of her matri-kin become ill, she must care for them. If she fails to meet these responsibilities, she may lose her right to inherit. (Nongbri, 1994, pp. 180-181)

These roles involve certain heavy tasks and duties that are part of their household chores, such as cooking, carrying water, obtaining firewood, washing clothes, and collecting twigs, edible plants, and roots from the village’s jungles, among others. Her familial obligations are firmly defined, and her role as a mother has enlarged her roles and responsibilities to meet the demands of the family.

According to the findings, the sample was collected from 30 households. In most of the households women are found to be the head of the family in comparison to men. Women play an important role in various areas both in the family and society. Women are looked upon to be more responsible for the household and all the family matters. The household responsibilities still fall heavily more on women than men. Women are widely acknowledged to serve crucial roles in both the home and the wider community.

c. Women’s participation in the socio-economic life of the village

Women engage in a variety of socio-economic tasks. Economic activities carried out by women create less money than those carried out by men. Women’s incomes are lower than men’s, even if they engage in the economy. The only option to expand women’s economic participation in a wide sense is through better education. The chief principal occupation of the villagers is agriculture, and the majority of the locals rely on it for a living. Apart from agriculture, a few people worked in piggery and poultry husbandry, as well as selling vegetables, shoes, clothes, betel nut (kwai), and breaking stones for sale as a secondary source of income. This includes working a day as a side job such as

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and Meghalaya Community Led Landscape Management Project (MCLLMP). Apart from that, some people work in schools as teachers in various roles. Selling of brooms is the main source of income in Jatah Lakadong village. Both men and women take part in cutting and collecting the broom grass which is harvested only once a year in the month of January to March. The brooms are sold to the businessmen for a price that varies depending on the year. In the year (2021-2022), the cost of 1 (one) kilogram was between ₹100 and ₹150, so 1 (one) quintal (100 kilograms) would cost between ₹10,000 and ₹15,000.

d. Women's participation in the social life of the village

Women's standing improves in society when they are free to work and participate in various social and recreational activities. Women in rural Khasi society are unrestricted and can engage freely in any social function. Women in Jatah Lakadong village are active participants in a variety of local organizations that contribute to the village's socio-economic well-being in different groups including the Self Help Group (SHG), Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) and Non-Government Organization (NGO).

e. Women's participation in the political institutions of the village

Only a few households in the village practised other faiths, with the majority of the families being Christian Catholics. The women in this community take an active role in the Church's religious ceremonies and rituals. Women participate in various of activities, including leading prayer services, offering reflections during prayer services, visiting sick people at home, and so on. As we have seen, women play the major role in encouraging children and assisting them in the growth of their Christian faith.

f. Women's participation in the political institutions of the village

A Khasi village is autonomous and has control over all its inhabitants, but the control is collectively exercised by a council of elders called the Dorbar Shnong (the village council). In the past, there were no positions reserved for women in the village council. Furthermore, women did not have the right to either run the office in the Dorbar Shnong or exercise their franchise within the institution of the Dorbar. During the research, it was discovered that in modern times, women in Jatah Lakadong village are allowed to participate in the Village Council (Dorbar Shnong), they were encouraged to join the committee, express any ideas or suggestions during the council meeting, and were involved in the decision-making process. Through this study, it can be remarked that tribal women's political participation is a big step to women's empowerment in general. Political participation of women in the local meetings is increasing nowadays compared to the past.

CONCLUSION

The current research under taken in Jatah Lakadong village highlights that women's social status is determined by their involvement in various roles such as decision-making which portrays changes, that have taken place in modern times. Even though the respondents followed a matrilineal line of ancestry, the practical participation of females in family and

household decision-making was rigid and the primary decision makers were the male members of the household. However, when it comes to naming of the child, property inheritance and governance of the family, customary norms were strong, highlighting the underlying contradictions in Khasi matriarchy, matriarchal, matrilineal (Bachofen, 1967).

The research finding shows that the participation of women was observed higher in certain domains such as socio-economic, political and religious activities whereas in some other domains such as agricultural pursuits, the male members' participation is dominant and women were still constrained to their traditional responsibilities. Women's contribution to the socio-economic, political, and religious spheres have resulted in several changes in society.

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