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**MEMORIAL LECTURE**

**Kum ka jingkyrmaw burom ia I Babu Soso Tham ha ka Lyngkhuh  
Sngi-iap Ba-Sanphewwei jong I.**

bad ka

**SYMPOSIUM**

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**“KA KTIEN KA TEI IA KA JAITBYNRIEW”**

**==== H. ELIAS ====**

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The Matrilineal System and Social Change in  
the Khasi Society.

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"The old order changeth, yielding place to the new" - this could well be applied to societies, because societies, like living organisms, undergo changes over time. The pace and direction of such changes may vary, but the factor dynamic changes remain. It may be true to say that some of the North-East tribals have seen changes in many aspects of life. Because of their earlier contact with other groups and communities, the Khasis especially have witnessed changes in the different areas of life-religion, the socio-cultural, the socio-economic and the political life.

Before we go into details regarding social changes, it may be fruitful to try to reconstruct the social, cultural and economic organization of the Khasis as it was in the past. We can hypothesize a small tribe living in very close-knit communities of different clans (kur) in villages dotting the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The tribes were close to nature - the fields (pynthor, bri) providing food, the thick dense forests providing fuel, herbs, animals and birds, the small mountain streams and clear rivers providing cool, clean water as well as fish. Land i.e., the forests, the fields (pynthor), the mines, was owned by the whole community. The 'raid' land could be used by any family who needed it at any given time, and passes back to the 'raid' when not in use. Land ownership for the most part was never individual, but communal - either the whole village or the community owned the land. It was a society based on reciprocal give-and-take and mutual understanding. Building a house did not require hired labour, since all able-bodied adults stepped in to help; in times of sorrow like death or illnesses, there invariably were others to help, not necessarily only those belonging to the kur. In such a society, clan (kur) relationship was perhaps more important than a nuclear family relationship; hence there were probably no 'loners' nor outcasts, except in extreme cases. At the socio-political level, the Syiem, the Myntries, the Lyngdohs and Dolois had different roles to play for the welfare of the people (U khun U hajar). They were not roles of power and dominance, but roles of services and ministries. The expression "U Syiem U Kmie" indicates the role of a mother who looks after the nurture, sustenance and overall welfare of her children,

also protecting them from danger or the enemies' clutch. "U khun U hajar" also reiterates this parent-child relationship. At the familial level, the major roles played by the matriach (Iawbei), her husband (Thawlang) and her brothers (including the Suidnai) were well-defined. Each played his or her assigned role for the good of the whole clan. "The good" here is to be interpreted as economic welfare (i.e., never going hungry for want of food) as well as moral and spiritual welfare (i.e., with proper fear and reverence for 'U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw', and observances of all religious and social taboos). There were no beggars; a handicapped man or one who has fallen in bad times is looked after by his Kur. The Iawbei was also the 'blei-ing' who presided over the household and domestic affairs. The Thawlang (literally the co-maker) was 'U Kpa ba lah ba iai'; he was the one who gathered his children round the hearth (Ka Rympei) in the evenings to pass on the oral traditions, to teach folk songs, and to give moral instructions (ka sneng ka kraw). Hence he was like the philosopher and guide for the young ones. 'U Suidnia' (the senior and spiritual maternal uncle) was the one who performed religious rites within the family (kur), on occasions like Ka Jer Khun, Ka leit thang, or act as the spokesman or 'U Ksiang' as in pre-engagement dialogues with the boy's uncles. The expressions 'U kni ha ka iap ka im' shows his importance on occasions like these. The peripheral roles of Mei-rad, Mei-kha and other uncles and aunts are for blessings (kyrkhu kyrdoh) or for moral instructions (ka sneng ka kraw).

We can also hypothesize a small tribe (from S.E. Asia, part of these hills from times immemorial,) constantly at war with neighbouring plainmen. Men had to go to wars, women were the ones who nourished and nurtured not only the young, but the invalid, the old, the disabled, warring fathers may come and go, hence could not always be available for domestic affairs, or looking after the property. In times of war these were left to the women - the matriach, the youngest daughter (the older ones probably married off) and the matriach's old brothers who were perhaps too old to be warriors. By virtue of being the youngest, the daughter still remaining in the family was appointed custodian (Not owner) of all the family's properties. Secondly, because of the small numbers in difficult and uncertain times, it was probably easier and

economically more viable, to pool resources together i.ee, all the matriach's brothers put in their earnings (Nong-khynraw) into the family coffers. (This is an alternative suggestion regarding the genesis of the economic aspect of the matrilineal system; the one suggested by Mr. Donbok Laloo in 'Ki Paju Lyngkhot' explains the genesis of the system of lineage through the mother.)

The 'traditional' Khasi society, in the strictest sense of the word, no longer exists. Infiltrations into the socio-politico-economic and cultural traditions came via the prolonged contacts with other communities, new religions, education, modernization, the media like the radio and T.V. etc. Dilutions in the traditional system vary from place to place. Broadly speaking, the cities and towns have witnessed changes much more rapidly, and in a greater extent, than villages. Such changes are due to (1) religion (2) geographical mobility and urbanization (3) modernization (4) industrialization (5) education (6) contact with other communities and (7) political changes, to name just a few.

In the field of religion, age-old beliefs and rituals which express those beliefs are being replaced by other beliefs and practices. The numerous 'ki ksuid ki khrei' to be appeased or driven away through sacrificial rites and rituals, have diminished in importance. For Christians the ceremony of 'Jer-Khun' and the traditional rituals of disposing the dead, are replaced by baptisms and Christian burials with hymns and prayers. For the Khasi Hindus in Nartiang ka Jer-Khun is replaced by Hindu rites.

Geographical mobility and urbanization have disintegrated the close-knit social organizations described earlier. Members of a kur or a particular kpoh may be scattered all over in different places within or outside the state. One's maternal uncles may live in the four corners of the state, if not further, each minding his own affairs. Geographical distance usually leads to psychological and emotional distance. The urban life in a town or city is not particularly conducive to close communal life, since the people come from different areas (therefore unknown), have different backgrounds, and also include a considerable number of a shifting population, especially those living in rented places. Besides, 'modern' urban life is marked by competition, in-

dividualism and selfishness, sharing of natural resources, mutual give-and-take is giving way to selfish needs and greeds. As stated earlier, the ownership, tilling and preservation of land in the past was strictly governed by an unwritten code of conduct based on age-old traditions. Unfortunately this has changed. In many cases the 'khatduh' and/or her husband have become land-grabbers. The tragedy is even more if the 'khatduh's husband is a wastrel, be he a khasi or non-khasi. A playboy 'Pyrsa' can wipe out the family's immense wealth within a decade. Sometimes one or two drunken uncles can be bribed to dispose off lands belonging to the kur.

Urbanization and modernization also mean changes in the types of occupations. While in the past the roles of men and women were more or less well-defined, in the present time men and women compete in colleges, in offices and in other professions. In some cases, the major or even the sole breadwinner may be the wife, hence her position and responsibilities willy-nilly become more important, especially if her husband is a loafer and an irresponsible character.

Geographical mobility and urbanization also results in the evolution of the nuclear family, sometimes cut off from the kurs and the khas. Husband and wife become dependent on each other, to pool resources, to set up home, to raise children etc. Each should be more emotionally and psychologically attached to the other; the wife should have closer links with her husband in all spheres of life rather than to her Ing or kur. However, the wife at times is more attached to her Ing and/or kur, to whom she turns to in times of conflict with her husband. The same is true of the husband. It may be true to say that the husband's role in a completely nuclear family is nebulous at the present stage of transition. The husband's somewhat shaky position is compounded by the fact that women are generally economically and personally independent.

The loss of importance and power of the maternal uncles are due to various reasons (1) the geographical, hence psychological distance (2) the uncle having set up his own nuclear family, hence more concerned with his family's (i.e. in his wife and children) affairs. It has

often been stated that to play the dual roles as father of his children in his wife's (and his) home, and that of an uncle in his neices' homes, is no longer possible nor feasible.

Industrialization in the form of coal-mining, lime-quarry mining, forest-based and agro-based industries etc., have produced different results. (1) It enhances the concept of individual ownership. Individuals assert ownership over forests, mines, etc., bypassing Kurs or any other groups. (2) It increases the gap between the rich and the poor. (3) It increases capitalism, exploitation and materialism.

An important factor in the process of 'modernisation' is the modern education based on the western model. Education has not only increased the social and economic success of a few, thus creating a socio-economic hierarchy, but it also divides the tribals in their conceptualizations, in their world-views, in their ways of looking at events, situations, issues, etc. For example, the educated rationalist may look on 'U Thlen' or 'Ki ksuid ki khrei' as superstitious beliefs rather than facts of life. Education informs us that one's genes are from the mother and from the father, hence the father is biologically and psychologically closer than the maternal uncles. On the whole education trains us to examine, to question, to compare, to evaluate, to rationalise, etc. Beliefs and customs are no longer accepted without subjecting them to close examination. Social phenomenon, such as the one under study, are being reviewed in the light of the present times and trends, and existing conditions.

More and prolonged contacts with other groups and communities have also changed traditional outlooks, codes of conduct, and ways of life, for good or bad. Using streams and rivers as latrines and garbage dumps was a thing unheard of by the tribals who almost worshipped nature. The worst thing that came out of such contact is the fact that the Khatduh has attracted all sorts of fortune-hunters and 'Pyrsa-poi-ei'. This point has come in for a lot of criticism against the present form of the inheritance aspect of the matrilineal system.

Lastly, the socio-political set-up of the traditional Khasi society is a thing of the past. 'U Syiem U kmie' is just a figure-head, the Myntris limited to minor spheres of the socio-political life. One implication of this is that there is no traditional authority. Also, administration of the Iewduh is a hotch-potch collaboration (??) between the Syiem and the municipality, with some scope for exploitation and manipulation by unscrupulous traders.

In summary, we see that close-knit clans and communities have been broken up or are in the process of disintegration. The once rural and agricultural tribal society is changing into a partly developed 'industrialised' society. Socially, the once egalitarian tribal society is fast changing into a society with hierarchies and social class - the haves and have-nots, the educated 'Babu' or 'Officer' and the uneducated labourer, farmer etc. One's own kith and kin have become troublesome 'Kur ja lur doh' in the 'modern' society.

Before considering the implications of such changes to the matrilineal system, I would like to state that being neither a sociologist, anthropologist nor one who has delved very deeply into traditional culture, my analysis and observations are that of a layman. Nonetheless, I would like to view society as an overall macro-system comprising several sub-systems, viz., the socio-economic, the socio-political, the socio-cultural and the socio-religious. These sub-systems may be compared to the pillars of a building; if one or two are removed, the building collapses or tilts precariously to one side. We have already discussed the dynamic changes which have taken place in the traditional Khasi society. Some of the sub-systems, e.g., the existence of a close-knit kur or epoh community under some kind of 'control', have been removed or changed, thus creating an imbalance in the over-all structure, and shaking the very foundations of the other sub-systems. For example, the role of the Khatduh as mere custodian is no longer true in a number of cases. The Khatduh has become the sole owner of most of the property. In other words, there has been a gradual shift of authority from the family 'durbar' of uncles etc., (acting on behalf of the whole Ing or kur), to the Khatduh. This came as a result of court cases during the British Raj. The maternal uncles nowadays have little or no say as to when and how she chooses her husband (or vice versa) or she and/

Also, the distinctions between Ka Nongtymmen, Ka Kamai-Umsyep, or Ka Nongkhynraw, are no longer maintained in many cases. Two case studies will make this clear. In the first case, a 'garikhana' started by the late father was forcefully taken by the Khatduh and the sur from the eldest son. The father had promised the garikhana to the son who had spent many years working in it. In the second case, the acres and acres of land acquired by the late father (hence not the Nongtymmen) were claimed by the Khatduh at insistence of her acquisitive and dominating husband. Incidentally, the property and wealth is depleted in one generation. The woman "gets" the children, in the sense of lineage, but her husband has twined them almost to the level of landless labourers. One wonders, did he not consider them his own children, because they do not bear his name?

Another example of the changes in the present-day matrilineal system is that the roles traditionally assigned to different individuals have become vague. It is because of this that we hear of sayings like "Ia U Rangbah ban ieng ruh kynduh, ban shong ruh jhieh" meaning that the man is neither here (the wife's family) nor there (the sisters' families). Perhaps there is some truth in the saying, for some hapless individuals.

Though I have focussed mostly on the economic aspect, especially in the problem of land and property, there are other areas too which have become deficient as a result of the different changes. For example, in quite a number of households, neither the mother nor the father have a hold and responsibility over the children. Whereas in some other cases, the upbringing of children is a tussle between mother and relatives (usually her mother and/or brothers), with the father as a disinterested party. Only in a few cases is there a joint responsibility of father and mother in terms of provision as well as discipline and control.

In short, the present day matrilineal system, devoid of the traditional codes of conduct, restrictions, religious and social sanctions, is a sub-system which has undergone tremendous changes. This sub-system may no longer be the most appropriate and fit system for the

changed and changing conditions in all spheres of our society. It may not help us to survive the modern conditions in the present decade. It may not be the best system to take us into the more competitive and aggressive 21st century (if we survive that long as a small community). Why so? Because the present form of the matrilineal system seems to be giving more power and responsibilities to women. Also, studies have shown that matrilineal systems : by and large develop in women aspects of character usually associated with men-dominance, aggression and decision-making abilities; while men develop more passive and emotional characteristics. Is this striking a note somewhere in our minds? Are most of our social ills also directly or indirectly related to the present form of the matrilineal system?

Unless some systematic study is done, we do not know for sure. At the same time I feel that we cannot ignore or dismiss the numerous books and articles, discussions and talks on the many kinds of disadvantages of the present form of the matrilineal system. Such disadvantages have been documented so I will not dwell on these. True, there are plus points too that we cannot ignore. As a woman, I feel that the system has given tremendous personal freedom to women; we often hear that Khasi women are in an enviable position. That is looking at one side of the coin; the other side is that women in our society also have to shoulder many responsibilities, sometimes far more than they can bear. A stable and strong society is one which has room and gives opportunities for both men and women. Ideally there should be complementary roles for men and women in accordance with biological and psychological differences. Most societies are imperfect in patriarchal and predominantly male-dominated societies women are suppressed and given little opportunities. In the present-day Khasi society some research findings reveal rather disturbing findings, e.g. significant differences in affection and security, in achievement and motivation between boys and girls, greater alienation in boys than in girls etc. Could it be that our society because of the corrupted form of the matrilineal system in the present-time, is suppressing our boys in preference to girls? I do not know the answer. But<sup>as</sup> I have ~~as~~ stated earlier, each serious and concerned adult, especially the ~~and~~ outside social workers and sociologists, should

try to examine these disturbing trends more thoroughly. Misunderstandings between the strong 'Traditionalist' school, with a cultural approach, and the 'Non-traditionalist' group whose approach is sociological and analytic, will hopefully be cleared up. I for one and all for the preservation of 'culture', if it does not conflict with existing conditions, stagnate or regress one half of whether pure, undiluted, traditional 'culture' exists or not in any society; or whether preservation of all aspects of 'culture' is possible. Social history is replete with examples of dynamic changes which have taken place as a matter of course, with no legislation nor social sanction. However, one would always wish that changes are for the better, not the worse.

Changing trends show up in the urban areas; for example, the use of the father's name. Fears and apprehensions abound as to the possible confusion, especially fears of 'Ka sang ka ma''ka khein kur khein jait' etc. What are the possibilities? Will writing both father's and mother's names help in the tracing of geneological descent? Will writing records and family trees help the future generation know their Kur and kha, thereby observe the strict code of clan exogamy? Or will the descent from the maternal line continue to exist? I do not know the answer; but I hope that the discussions and deliberations in this Consultation will help to give us a sense of direction.

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