

GENDER PREFERENCE IN KHASI SOCIETY

Valentina Pakyntein

Introduction

This paper is an appraisal of gender preference in Khasi society. The concepts of 'extinct family' and 'adoption' are particularly discussed here in order to evaluate the status accorded to women by this society. The Khasis here refer to the native inhabitants of the Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. They include a number of subgroups like Khyntiam (usually referred to as the Khasi), Pnar (also referred to as Jaintia or Synteng), Bhoi, War and the Lyngngam. Some writers have also included peoples living in the northeastern slopes of the Khasi and Jaintia hills such as Labang, Khyrwang and Nongphyllut (Lyngdoh 1991:12).

The Khasis regard *Ka lawbei Tynrai* (root ancestress), *U Thawlang* (her husband), and *U Suidnia* (her brother) as the apical ancestress and ancestors. The Khasi saying *Long Jaid na ka Kynthei* (Gurdon 1975:82, Roy 1938:124) meaning from the woman sprang the kind or species indicates that they reckon descent from the mother only and it is through her that the children are recognized as Khasi. If the mother is a non-Khasi a new clan name is given to her off-springs

by the relatives of their father (father's mother and/or father's sister). This is a system of incorporating non-Khasi into the Khasi society and culture (Nongbri 1984:6). The process of including the progenies from a non-Khasi mother and Khasi father takes two to three generations (Khongphai 1974:10).

The Khasis, excluding certain section of the War, practise female ultimogeniture. The youngest daughter known as *Ka Khadduh* inherits the lion's share of both ancestral and acquired property of the parents. The elder daughters also inherit a portion of such property but the sons, except among the War Khasis, are deprived of the ancestral property. Although the youngest daughter inherits the property, she is not the sole owner; she merely acts as its custodian. Hence she is called *Ka Nongri Ka Nong Sumar*. It is the maternal uncle who has the actual control over the property (Gurdon 1975:76-83, Natarajan 1977:36, Dasgupta 1984:111, 112).

The maternal uncle (*U Kni*) and the youngest daughter act as the family priest and priestess for performing rituals pertaining to the family (Synrem 1986, Passah 1988: 2, 3). They are some times assisted by the community priest from the Lyngdoh clan. It is also the duty of the youngest daughter to see that the death rites (incineration and bone internment) of her family members are performed in an appropriate manner. Besides her religious duties, she is responsible towards all members of her family. She resides in her mother's house and looks after her parents in their old age (Gurdon 1975:76, 85, Natarajan 1977:18, War 1988:4, Syiem 1988:4). She also looks after her unmarried and disabled brothers and sisters, widowed, divorced, or deceased sisters and brothers, and also their children. Her house is regarded by all family members as a refuge and is open to all those family members who are in need (Nongbri 1984:5, Syiem 1988: 3,4). Thus the rights of inheritance exist collaterally with the socio-economic and socio-religious responsibilities of the inheritress. She performs these responsibilities under the guidance of her maternal uncle.

It is only in the political sphere where the women cannot participate because the Khasi society does not permit women to participate in it. Exception to this general rule exists but the fact remains that politics is the male domain. The women were even debarred from attending the traditional council (Chattopadhyaya 1985:14, Natarajan 1977:18, War 1988:5, Syiem 1988:8) though, according to DebRoy (1981:10), the Jaintia women had a lot of political influence.

The role of the youngest daughter as the 'heiress' and the eldest maternal uncle as the 'authority' indicate complementary roles shared by both the sexes. Nakane (1967:131) has termed these two as 'Pair-Status'. Their duties, privileges, and rights form a bond of obligation and reciprocity. If society has given women the responsibility of continuing the clan it has given the men the responsibility of seeing the affairs of the state. All this seems to place the men and women on the same value scale. However, the customs of 'extinct-family' and 'adoption' practised by the people in the past tilted the scale in favour of women. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine these customs in order to appreciate the value the society accords on each sex.

Concept of Extinction

The term *Iap Duh* or extinction is applied to the family which has no female issue or heiress. Such family is known as *Ing Iap Duh*. The term *Iap Duh* is also applicable to a woman who has no female issue or is a spinster. The descendants from any woman after four or five generations form a *Kpoh* or lineage and perpetuate her line of descent. Thus, if a woman has no female issue her line will become extinct. This means that a family or a woman without a female issue is in danger of being extinct and is looked down upon. In the past it was even seen as a stigma for the male members of the family or male descendants of such a woman. Extinction is considered as an omen and attributed to a sin committed by members of the family (DebRoy 1981:24).

Extinction or threat of it is a grave matter in Khasi society. But the society has a mechanism to prevent a person from getting such stigma, that is, by adopting a girl. Hence adoption, which obviates the extinction or threat of it, may be briefly discussed here.

Adoption

Adoption involves the transfer of an individual from one filial relationship to another, from 'natural' to 'fictional' relationship (Goody 1976:69). According to Gurdon (1975:85, Cantlie 1974:15), both Khasi and Synteng observed a custom known as *Rap Ing* (an abbreviation for *Iarap Ing*) meaning to help in the house, or adoption. If a female member is adopted by the family without a female heiress she acts as *Ka Rap ing*, performs the family ceremonies, and ultimately inherits the family's ancestral property she is recognised as *Ka Khadduh* or the youngest daughter and virtually becomes the head of the household (*Ka Trai Ing*).

The next question that arises is who may be adopted. A girl chosen for adoption may be from a different clan or lineage but must be of the same phratry or *Kur*. A Khasi girl from another 'kur' is usually not adopted because it may lead to a breach of clan exogamy in later generations. In case of a non-Khasi girl chosen for this purpose she is required to be adopted into the clan of the family who is suffering from the threat of extinction and treated as a member of the clan itself. Thus a girl to be adopted for such purpose must either be a member of the same clan or phratry or assigned the membership of the clan before being adopted for the role of heiress. In this regard Laitflang (1988) writes that "arrangements are made to adopt a girl from the maternal aunts to continue the line". Shadap (1988) adds: "When there is no female child or issue, the *kpoh* of that *kur* even buys female from the plains to continue the *jait*".

The reasons for adopting a girl by a family facing extinction are many. First and foremost of such reasons is to

prevent extinction itself and ensures the continuation of the clan through the matronymic system followed strictly in the traditional society. Second, to prevent the family property from being forfeited to the Syiem because, according to custom, the property of heiressless family would revert to the Syiem as the legal caretaker (Gurdon 1975:86). The maternal uncle or brother, as the case may be, has the right to manage it during his lifetime only. He cannot inherit the family property and pass it on to his children. Third, to save oneself from the shame or stigma at the time of seeking marital alliance with a member or another clan for a family without a female is not welcome in such matters. It is also to be noted that father's mother and sister have important roles to play in the welfare of the son's or brother's children. It is his mother's or sister's privilege to bless a new born child. It is for the mother to choose a name for the child and participate actively in the naming ceremony (*Jerkhun*). Moreover, a woman as *Meikha* or *Kha* acts as the godmother to his children. The children are taught to love and respect the father's kin especially *Meikha* and *Kha* (Mawrie 1981). Fourth, the death rites are conducted by the maternal uncle and the youngest daughter. It is regarded as inauspicious if the death rites are not carried out as per custom. Finally, a man from an extinct family cannot succeed to any political office. Hence it is more for the advantage of the males that a female heiress is adopted.

Gender Preference and Change

In traditional Khasi culture, the importance of a female is unquestioned. She is the embodiment of Khasi matriliney. Only a female is adopted and never a male (Natarajan 1977:136). And a family can continue even without a male but not without a female.

This implies that a female child was naturally preferred in traditional Khasi society. In Gassah's (1988) words: "The birth of a female child in Jaintia society is hailed with great

joy as that of the male ones. And in the upbringing of the male and female children in general, both are treated equally. However, it may not be an exaggeration to say that the parents often feel happier to have a female child than a male, being sure of the continuity of the family and clan”.

Such ideas are galore but seldom substantiated with data. Hence the present author would like to present the major findings of her study based on 225 Khasi married women respondents (of whom 30 were separated or widowed and 25 had entered into marriage with non-Khasis) and 195 male respondents of Shillong. The schedule was simple and covered three specific questions on gender preference. The data are presented in Tables I, II, and III below.

Table I : Sex Preference for Children

Preference	Wife		Husband	
	No.	%	No.	%
Male	—	—	1	0.5
Female	4	1.7	2	1.1
Both	221	98.3	192	98.4
Total	225	100.0	195	100.0

Source: Fieldwork

Table II : Sex Preference for the Only Child

Preference	Wife		Husband	
	No.	%	No.	%
Male child	2	0.9	9	4.6
Female child	78	34.7	24	12.3
Any child	145	64.4	162	83.1
Total	225	100.0	195	100.0

Source: Fieldwork

Table I prima facie shows that there is no gender preference in Khasi society as more than 98 per cent male as well as female respondents mentioned 'both' and only a negligible per cent of respondents mentioned either male or female preference. This is also largely corroborated by the data on Table II which is based on responses of both male and female respondents to the hypothetical situation of only one child. The usual reply would be: "A child, male or female, is equally dear to the parents... Both male and female children are necessary because both have different roles to play. Sons look after the family in general and daughters look after parents and grandparents when they grow old". Some respondents even draw analogy between children of both the sexes with flowers of different colours.

If these two tables are read more carefully one does find a preference for the female children. When figures for male and female preferences are compared (see Table II) there is a clear indication that female children are preferred. This is equally true for both male and female respondents though the bias for female children is apparently heavier among the female than among the male respondents. The usual answer one gets from the male respondents is like this: "Sex of the child does not make any difference for a man because man does not lose or gain anything. The child does not take the father's surname".

Table III : Reasons for Female Child Preference

Reasons	Female (N 24)		Male (N 14)	
	No	%	No	%
Old age security	14	58	10	41
Continuation of lineage	12	50	6	25
Inheritance of property	4	16	—	—
Others	10	41	4	17

Table III given above brings out some of the major reasons for female preference. This table shows that 'old age security' is the most important reason for preferring female children, followed by 'continuation of lineage'. Incidentally, the 'inheritance of property' is not, according to this table, as important as it is normally made out to be. The above order of reasons is true for both male and female respondents though some difference can be noticed between male and female respondents regarding the first two important reasons. The sense of old age insecurity seems to be stronger among women than among men and the sense of responsibility regarding continuation of lineage is more heavily borne by women than by men.

The Khasi society has undergone many changes in the last couple of centuries. It is written: "(t)he contact of the Khasi with the various socio-cultural or socio-religious influence coming from outside their land locked region has had a shaking effect on many aspects of their traditional ethos and culture" (Mathur 1979:13). Significant changes began after this society came in contact with the British and particularly the missionaries. It is aptly remarked that "The prime factor which induced and fostered silent and mammoth changes in the Khasi society was the work of the missionaries for more than a century" (Natarajan 1977:91). The missionaries were instrumental not only in converting the local people into Christianity but also imparting education on them and giving indirect impetus to their economy. With the introduction of cash economy the concept of private property gradually became important in this society. The net result was a change in the roles and privileges of women, which may be briefly discussed below.

The traditional roles of the father's mother in the naming ceremony and of the youngest daughter in the death rites have been relegated to the background among the Christian Khasis. The dependence of men on women, particularly for the land they owned, had also gradually reduced with the

spread of education and availability of non-agricultural jobs for the men. The emergence of privately acquired property was a major threat to the matrilineal principle of inheritance in Khasi society. One of the most notable organizations actively fighting against matrilineal system of inheritance is *Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai*.

About ten years ago, the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly passed a bill known as the Meghalaya Succession to Self-Acquired Property (Khasi and Jaintia Special Provision) Bill, 1984. This Bill empowers the Khasi parents to bequeath their self-acquired property by will to any of their children, sons or daughters (Passah 1988). At present, though legally men can inherit only the self-acquired property of their parents they are known to have inherited ancestral property as well. Needless to say that the ancestral property is still inherited by a female if there is one in the family. This has received further back-up with the passage of the Khasi Lineage Bill, 1997 by the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council.

The attitude of the Khasi men and women towards many of their customs and practices has changed considerably with the spread of modern education and other forces of modernization. The stigma attached to an extinct family is not as strong today as it was before. Males from such families are neither looked down upon nor ridiculed. Consequently the custom of adopting a female child to carry on the matrilineal descent has been eroded too. The parents without a daughter are themselves interested to pass the property to their sons rather than to an adopted girl. Of course, they also expect their sons to look after them at the time of old age. With all these changes the reasons to prefer a female child as found in traditional Khasi society are making less and less sense today, particularly among those who have been converted into Christianity. It must be noted that most of the traditional roles of a heiress have no place among the Christian Khasis.

Conclusion

The preference for a female child was unambiguous in the traditional Khasi society, supported as it was by the complementary concepts of extinct family and adoption. But these concepts are no longer held sacrosanct and there are many forces trying to make the male child equally important. Such forces are not only exogenous but also endogenous. However, the Khasi matriliney has shown considerable resilience and despite the tide against it majority still adhere strictly to the traditional norms.

Continuation of the clan is still the most important responsibility of the women. Though the principles governing the inheritance of property are wavering now there is hardly any dispute on the wish that the property should remain within the clan. And all this is possible only if the mother-daughter chain is maintained and female preference is continued. To my mind such challenges to the system are natural but the system has its own mechanism to overcome such challenges and continue itself. One of the most important such mechanisms is the socialization process. Socialization of the children is an essential part of any society for the continuation of its norms, values, language, identity, etc. This responsibility lies in the hands of women in most societies. Hence a lot depends on the women for the continuation or discontinuation of their traditional status accorded by the matrilineal system.

The trend all over the world is to reconsider the identity and revive the forsaken traditions. The Khasis are no different in this matter. Hence they too want to maintain their matrilineal identity and this has been demonstrated beyond doubt by the passage of two bills mentioned above. It is in this context that the preference for a female child finds a renewed relevance or refocussing. But why does the study referred to herein show such an overwhelming percentage of respondents claiming no gender preference? This question raises a number of questions. Is it because they already had

children of both the sexes? Is it because they prefer child of any sex to no child? Is it because of the facade of an urban sophistication? Or is it me, a female Khasi standing in front of them and asking such questions, who is responsible for what the study shows? Answering these questions perhaps requires further probing.

REFERENCES

- Cantlie, K. 1934/1974. *Notes on Khasi Law*. Shillong: Khasi and Jaintia Press.
- DasGupta, P K. 1984. *Life and Culture of the Matrilineal Tribe of Meghalaya*. Delhi: Inter-India Publication.
- DebRoy, H L. 1981. *A Tribe in Transition: The Jaintia of Meghalaya*. Delhi: Cosmo Publication.
- Gassah, L S. 1988. "Status of women in the Jaintia culture". Seminar on *Status of Women in Tribal Cultures of Meghalaya*, organised by Centre for Literary and Cultural Studies, NEHU, 13-14 July.
- Goody, J. 1976. *Production and Reproduction: A Comparative Study of the Domestic Domain*. London: Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Gurdon, P R.T. Rpt.1975. *The Khasis*. Delhi: Cosmo Publication.
- Khongphai, A S. Rpt. 1974. *Principles of Khasi Law*. Shillong: Khasi and Jaintia Press.
- Laitflang, W R. 1988. "Effects of matrilineal system on Khasi society". Seminar on *Impact of Matrilineal System on Khasi society*, organised by ICSSR-NERC, Shillong, 27-28.
- Lyngdoh, M P R. 1991. *The Festival in the History and Culture of the Khasi*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications.
- Mathur, P R.G. 1979. *The Khasi of Meghalaya: Study in Tribalism and Religion*. Delhi: Cosmo Publication.
- Mawrie, H O. 1981. *The Khasi Milieu*. Trans. by Sujata Miri. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Nakane, C. 1967. *Khasi and Garo: A Comparative Study in Matrilineal System*. Paris: Mouton and Co.
- Natarajan, N. 1977. *Missionaries among the Khasi*. Delhi: Sterling Publications.
- Nongbri, T. 1984. "Problems of Matriliney: A short review of Khasi kinship structure". *Journal of NEICSSR*, 8 (8).
- Passah, P M. 1988. "Status of women in Jaintia culture". Seminar on *Status of Women in Tribal Cultures of Meghalaya*, organised by Centre for Literary and Cultural Studies, NEHU, 13-14 July.

- Roy, David. 1938. "The Place of Khasi in the World". *Man in India*, 18 (2 & 3).
- Shadap, R. 1988. "Matrinyimic system among the Khasi". Seminar on *Impact of Matrinyimic System on Khasi society*, organised by ICSSR-NERC, Shillong, 27-28.
- Singh, K. 1985. "Syiem and durbar in Khasi Polity". S. K. chattopadhyaya (ed), *Tribal Institutions of Meghalaya*. Guwahati: Spectrum Publications.
- Syiem, I M. 1988. "Women in Khasi society". Seminar on *Status of Women in Tribal Cultures of Meghalaya*, organised by Centre for Literary and Cultural Studies, NEHU, 13-14 July.
- Synrem, H K. 1986. *Revivalism in the Khasi Society*. Unpub. Ph.D. disser., NEHU.
- War, J. 1988. "Status of women in traditional Khasi Culture". Seminar on *Status of Women in Tribal Cultures of Meghalaya*, organised by Centre for Literary and Cultural Studies, NEHU, 13-14 July.
- Note: This is the revised version of the paper presented in the national seminar on "Concept of Age and Sex in the Tribal Societies" organised by the University of Delhi, Delhi during 5 to 7 February, 1993.