

ABSTRACT

**TWO IMAGES OF MATRILINY :
THE KHASI AND THE NAIR**

By

CELINAMMA SCARIAH

Department of Sociology

*Submitted in fulfilment of the requirement of the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology
Of North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong*

NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY

SHILLONG

MARCH, 2000

DS
301.420954164
SCA



-----INTRODUCTION

The present study is an attempt to examine and analyze the two famous matrilineal communities of India; one in the Khasi Hills in North –Eastern India, the Khasis, and the other in Kerala, the South-Western corner of the country, the Nairs. There has not been enough evidences to establish a direct connection about the matrilineal origin of the two communities. The Nairs who were enjoying comfortable dominance in the rigid caste-structure of Kerala society, were to experience a crisis in the second half of the nineteenth century which led to its gradual disintegration. The Khasi society, on the other hand, which is still strong in its matrilineal culture has reached the point of time where the need is felt for a serious introspection and revaluation of its institutions, laws and long cherished customs.

The similarities and differences in marriage and family organizations cross-culturally have led to several theories based on both speculation and empiricism. Bachofen, McLennan, Tylor and Morgan all had their views on the various practices of marriage and types of family forms existing in human societies. India's many religious communities, castes and tribes in different cultural regions present an extraordinary variety of family systems and the patterns of kinship found in our country cover almost the entire gamut of known kinship systems. Empirical studies contributing to the understanding of kinship and family in India are of varied kinds. Some valuable information is found in the general works on the tribes and castes of various regions and in individual studies of particular tribes, castes and villages attempting total coverage of their cultures and social system. Their coverage includes descriptive accounts and analytical descriptions; simple comparisons and analysis based on local, regional and national comparative data; and conceptual clarifications and meaningful discussions of methodological problem.

---THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The scientific study of family and kinship systems is only a century old, but in that brief period it has engendered a more controversy and a greater variety of theoretical

formulations than have most aspects of human society. Intensive fieldwork methods developed during the early twentieth century produced a new body of detailed information on kinship, marriage and the family.. We can look forward to a continued flow of empirical data on kinship and family and to a continuing dialogue between studies utilizing analytic variables and statistical methods on the one hand and intensive studies of a more limited range but concerned with kinship and family organisations as wholes. The major theoretical approaches used in sociological analysis are the systems theory, the functionalism and the conflict theory.

The Present Approach

In this study we intend to follow the functional model for the purpose of analysing the two matrilineal societies; the Khasi and the Nair. The families in both the societies are examined in terms of their functional prerequisites. Though the structure and variance are not inherent in any social system, a particular social structure remains stable or accurate only for a particular period of time, i.e. as long as the functional prerequisites or needs of the social system are sufficiently met. In the wake of the strong forces of change, if certain institution in the social system fails to fulfill their duties to the whole, i.e, the family, they are bound to be replaced by new institutions or units.

The core elements in the matrilineal structure could be lineage, authority and inheritance and the nucleus of the core unit is the brother-sister relationship. The major thought to be put in this context is to find out the contribution of each of these elements to the system and also to see to what extent these factors bring about functional unity for the system.

In the course of the historic evolution of the community, if any of these elements become an obstacle to its progress, then, we assume that it becomes dysfunctional, which means, the system has to look for new functional alternatives thereby adapting itself to the changed situations calling for a change in the structural pre-requisites also. In this study we attempt to identify the elements that have become dysfunctional in both the societies in the wake of the new currents of social change and the new functional

requisites for the changed systems. We also would like to find out the differential influences of the similar social forces on both the systems due to the differences in their environments.

However, the functional approach alone is not sufficient to explain the two societies and the changes that have taken place or are taking place in the two societies. Functionalism conceives family as a welfare system with a homogeneous structure forcing adaptability on the members to bring about stability and order in the system. Very often stability is equated with gender inequality. It fails to conceive the conflict and resilience in the systems. One approach alone is not sufficient to explain most of the sociological phenomena. The disintegration theory would be appropriate to explain the changes that take place in these societies.

With the changes in the forms of production and of wealth characterized by cash-crop farming and wage-work there is a tendency, first, to narrow the generation depth and span of effective matrilineage and second, to strengthen the elementary family as a significant economic, residential and socializing unit. Gradually, the matrilineal groups break down, especially for purposes of inheritance, in to small uterine sibling groups and their immediate descendants through females. A transitional picture of initial decay of the larger unilineal groupings followed by conflicts within it due to the increasing demand for autonomy within the elementary unit is observed.

----- OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

We understand from the available evidences that matriliney was the rule among the Nairs of Kerala. But due to various socio-political and economic reasons and in the face of the powerful currents of social change the matrilineal system crumbled in Kerala paving the way to patrilineal system. Still the remnants of matriliney are very much alive among them. For the Khasis, on the other hand, matriliney is the rule from time immemorial and even today inspite of the fact that the Khasi society also is familiar with modernization and the new technological advancements. Hence the researcher has been interested in

finding out the reasons for the differences in the statuses of the two communities. Given the broader framework of the present study the specific objectives are:-

- (a) to study historically and examine the present status of the two communities with regard to lineage, inheritance and authority,
- (b) to examine the factors responsible for sustaining matriliney among the Khasis and for its disappearance from the Nair society, and
- (c) to examine the differential impact of the modern forces of change on both these communities.

----- **METHODOLOGY**

The present study has attempted to examine and document the two forms of matriliney existing among the Nairs and the Khasis. The documentation and analysis has been carried out to examine the present status of the two communities and the factors responsible for its sustenance among the Khasis and its decline among the Nairs.

The researcher was already familiar with the customs and practices of the Nairs since she hails from the same area although, from a different community. In the course of an informal visit to a Khasi village, she got fascinated by the family system and life patterns of this highly liberated women power.

The scholar adopted the case study method, which included intense interviews and personal observation. She identified fifteen selected families each from both the communities out of which ten each are demonstrated here. By forcing different perspectives on the same phenomenon the researcher has qualitatively portrayed divergent images that might emerge from each perspective. Because the single case study is treated as cluster of heterogeneous units of analysis the term 'case cluster' also is used to designate the method.

The study is comprehensive in nature which includes data keeping in view of the generational depth of a few families. Oscar Lewis' method of studying "Five Families" of

Mexico is adopted here in which he has introduced a method of seeing individuals as they present themselves within families, which were also carefully placed within specific milieus.

Keeping in view the nature of the present enquiry, the researcher conducted the study based on primary data which was collected through case study method.. The secondary data was collected from published observations and studies which included books, journals, government reports, gazettes, census reports, legal documents as well as other relevant publications. The intention has been to provide sufficient references to put this study into a general framework. In the second stage of the study, meetings and discussions with experts; intellectuals, academicians and social workers were conducted in both the societies to get a better idea about the two societies. This was very useful in getting the true text of the communities because in some cases the information that we get from the cases could be slightly twisted or vague thereby affecting the clarity of the study.Hence a researcher had to combine her personal observations as well as the discussions and interviews she conducted with their male counterparts. The scholar tried to select cases falling in the age group of 30-60 keeping in mind to accommodate rural-urban, employed-unemployed and rich-poor variables to make the cases more representative..

For the analysis, each case was scrutinized individually from various dimensions and the findings of all the cases were codified together in order to arrive at conclusions. The secondary sources which include the published materials as well as the opinions of the experts were of great help in finding explanation for some of the findings.

-CHAPTERIZATION :

The dissertation is divided into the following chapters:

.I. Introduction.

This chapter deals with a general discussion on the origin and evolution of matriliney, and the various conceptual issues like family and marriage, kinship, lineage patterns etc.

Besides, the theoretical issues, review of literature, objectives of the study and the methodology are discussed here.

II. The Khasi Matriliney: An Overview.

The Khasi social structure is dealt in detail with a stress on its matrilineal feature. Attempt has also been made to portray the changes that are taking place in the Khasi society.

III. The Nair Matriliney: An Overview.

This chapter deals with the traditional Nair family system and the changes it succumbed to in the wake of the strong currents of social change.

IV. Understanding Matriliney: Twenty Case Studies.

A few families from both the Khasi and Nair communities are portrayed as they project themselves in their natural environments.

V. Analysis and Discussion.

VI. Conclusion.

The researcher started the study with the purpose of analysing the two matrilineal societies as they exist today. The study has focussed on the conditions under which the disruption of the traditional order of the Nairs has taken place. Similarly, the Khasi society has also been analysed in terms of the socio-economic and political factors. Attention is focussed on the factors responsible for the maintainance of its matrilineal structure in spite of the strong waves of social change.

-----CONCLUSION

In the present study the scholar has made an attempt to analyze the two societies in their traditional cultural contexts and the changes those societies have succumbed to in the phase of the changing socio-economic-political climate. However, the scholar portrays the "brother-sister relationship" as the nucleus of matriliney and the three factors; matrilineal descent, female inheritance and the authority exercised by the mother's brother, as its core elements.

During the second half of the nineteenth century various socio-political and economic factors threw upon the Kerala society resulting from the impact of a cash economy, western-style education, improved communication and a British inspired system of law on the complex social structure of an Indian princely state. Indeed, the economic pressures, the new administration, the changing values and the rigorous new legal system which were the concomitant of the new resources, seriously weakened the Nair matrilineal joint family and hastened its disintegration. The core elements of matriliney; the lineage, the avuncular authority and the female inheritance were more suited to a time when the landed property was concentrated in the hands of the Nairs and the less numerous Nambudiris and Kshatriyas. But it was proved to be ill-suited to the changing situation when most of its elements became dysfunctional and the 'brother-sister' bond which was the nucleus of matriliney started fading away.

The new functional alternatives called for a change in the existing structure paving the way to patriliney. The avuncular authority was substituted by paternal authority and the tracing of lineage on the female line by the male line lineage. The *tarawads* disintegrated giving rise to "nuclear" families and the *tarawad* property was partitioned on an "equal share" principle. The brother-sister relationship which was the nucleus of the *marumakkattayam* tarawads got replaced by the husband-wife bond which becomes the nucleus of the new set-up. Though the new system is called patrilineal, one cannot attribute an absolute allocation of lineage, authority and inheritance to the 'male line'. The property in the new system is distributed equally among all children. The authority, of course, has devolved more in the father's hands, though the mothers also are consulted. The modern generation is not bothered about the lineage practices. Majority of the Nairs, though, theoretically, have shifted to patriliney are still emotionally matrilineal.

The Khasi has come a long way from the traditional way of living and the subsequent agricultural practices to that of the modern urbanised living. The advent of Christianity and the forces of modernisation in Khasi society have undoubtedly weakened the matrilineal system. Modernisation and all that goes with it like education, industrialisation, urbanisation, literacy and communication, transportation etc. have played a

key role in changing the ways of thinking and acting of the so far isolated Khasi community. Some customs and values have undergone changes, some remained unchanged while another portion aided the process of modernisation by carrying forward the past tradition bringing about a new pattern and a fresh combination.

The authority of the uncle figure which was one of the core elements is fading gradually in the changed situation. Similarly a new trend is observed in the inheritance pattern too. There are few instances where parents started distributing their assets including the ancestral properties to their sons also. The practice of adopting the surnames of the fathers or both the father and mother together, which is a new pattern now, will definitely confuse the lineage identity.

The merits and demerits of matrilineal system in the Khasi society is hotly debated. Even while there is a strong opposition to any change from the present matrilineal to a patrilineal system, there is also a growing number of people, even women who have openly expressed opinions in favour of a change to a patrilineal system.

The functional pre-requisites which necessitated the survival and continuance of Khasi matriliney were the three core-elements; lineage, inheritance and authority. But we understand from the study that the same functional pre-requisites are not necessarily indispensable for the continuance of the social system. In the wake of the new changes the peripheral elements of the system and even some of the core-elements started losing their significance. This means that some new functional alternatives started substituting the core elements and the system started adapting itself to the new functional requirements, calling for a change in the structural pre-requisites also.

The major reason for the differential influence of the above mentioned factors could be the heterogeneous nature of the Kerala society and the homogeneous nature of the Khasi society. The *Nair* community is only a sub-system in the whole social system of the Kerala society while the Khasis constitute the whole social system in Khasi Hills. The *Nairs* live side by side with other patriarchal communities like the Nambuthiris, Christians, Muslims etc. Hence they did not have enough strength to resist alone the various

forces of social change that acted on it simultaneously. Another factor which contributed to the breakdown of matriliney in Kerala was the attack on the rigid caste structure of the society. Once the coherent hierarchical structure was shaken with the insurgence of various caste movements which became powerful towards the beginning of 20th century, matriliney could no longer persist in Kerala

The merging of Travancore with the Indian Union was another reason for the disintegration of matriliney among *Nairs*. By signing the "instrument of accession" and the subsequent merger of the state in the Indian Union, the Maharaja (The Padmanabhadasa) lost his power and authority. The *Nairs* were holding their supremacy in Travancore by their close association with the palace. In the new set up, economically also they became part of the integrated system of the country. On the other hand, the Khasi Hills was enjoying the protection from any law passed by the Indian Government as it came under the Sixth Schedule of the constitution. The Khasi which was an isolated community living in "excluded areas" was protected by the British and hence could maintain their identity and cultural tradition.

It has been suggested that the conflict between conjugal and paternal ties on the one hand and matrilineal ties on the other hand had been much aggravated by missionary and modern economic influence. For the Nairs the changes brought about by the modern capitalism in the forms of production led to changes in economic relationships which affected the kinship structure and kin relationships. On the other hand, the British could not exploit the Khasi Hills the same way as it did on the Kerala society due to two reasons. First, the Khasi like the Nair had no pressure on space or natural resources due to the easy availability of land and forest and the lack of population explosion in the Hills. Second, the British could not succeed in transferring the skill and resources of this community into economic terms. Hence, the Khasi continued with the traditional forms of production and life patterns except in the urban centres, which were gradually created for the imperial administration. Christian missionaries also, by and large, confined their educational institutions and mission activities to these belts. The counterparts of the urban dwellers in the villages remained more or less

unaffected by these changes and hence a drastic change in the Khasi social system became difficult.

Thus we have seen that the Khasi society is undergoing a phase of transition which started with the colonial rule and the Christian missionaries who could alter the "world view" of the people through the educational and other infra structural developments. The intervention of the potential cultural forces, especially the media has accelerated its pace. However the polarization in the opinions of the young vs old, urban vs rural, educated vs uneducated and radicals vs conservatives can accommodate only some changes in its matrilineal characteristics and not a complete reversal of its matrilineal structure. Similarly the *Nair* society, though it has shifted from matriliney to patriliney, still has left some of the remnants of matriliney as remarked by a prominent *Nair* leader, "Though *Nairs* of today are legally patrilineal, we still are emotionally matrilineal".

NEHU LIBRARY

103615
13-8-07
by.....
leading by.....
by.....
scribed by.....