

Social Transition And Status Of Women Among The Khasi Tribe Of Meghalaya By Survey Method

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ABSTRACT

The Khasis, a matrilineal tribe in Meghalaya in north- east India are the followers of a unique social system of matriliney .However, it is passing through a stage of transition from tradition to modern which may serve to be favorable for the status of women. The basic aim of the study is to understand the change that has taken place in it over the period of time among the Khasis of Meghalaya. Also it is relevant to enquire about the direction to which the position and status of women are moving with the development of the society. The present paper thus attempts to assess the dynamics of status and position of the Khasi women with the development of the society. It is examined through a number of social, economic, political, cultural, psychological and attitudinal indicators on the basis of the primary data on such factors collected randomly from a few villages and towns in East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya by survey method.

INTRODUCTION

There are different opinions prevailing in the Indian society as a whole regarding the status of women in tribal societies. The North eastern region of India presents a picture of women enjoying a better status than their counterparts in the rest of the country. The khasi tribe of Meghalaya is known for the enhanced social status of its women folk. The khasi society of Meghalaya is such a society, commonly known as matrilineal in which the parental lineage authority, title, inheritance, residence after marriage and succession are traced through women. In Khasi society, woman has the right to select a man, cohabit with him and marry him on her own choice. The other norm accompanying Khasi matriliney is that of matrilineal post-marital residence. This is rare in other society. In this society the question of illegitimate child, child abandoning, dowry and bride burning are unknown. The custom of bride price among tribe is based on the recognition of the importance of women's role in economic activities. In Khasi society women take part in trade which elsewhere is in the hands of men. In Meghalaya the khasi woman enjoys a comparative freedom albeit in different degrees... On the whole the society is unique Women have active role in natural resource management and environment protection. From the above one can conclude that women's emancipation is evident in all its glory in Meghalaya's unique women centric society.

Here a question arises: Does attributing the society to be matrilineal accord the khasi tribal woman a high status? This is a misconception created by many that

discriminatory social practices are nonexistent in the society and therefore khasi women are fortunate and truly empowered and do not need any special measures to ensure their rights. The survey reveals that more than two third of the families are run by males and only around 1/3rd are headed by females.

In spite of the version of better status in several parts of the region, there is the harsh reality of strong discrimination against khasi women in various spheres, particularly in the light of tradition and customary practices and questions of empowerment. The general assumption that matrilineal descent gives women a dominant position collapses under the weight of the reality of their actual condition—the multiple burden they bear and their actual existence under male-centered authority. Although Khasi women have rights over their children, this does not always translate into authority, which in most cases is shared between the mother's brother/brother on the one side and by the father/husband on the other side, an arrangement obviously made to reconcile male authority. Notwithstanding the dual responsibility imposed by tradition on Khasi men in their role as brother and husband, in reality it is the mother who works and stints and saves, and garners all her resources to ensure the sustenance of her children. But when it comes to the administration of the family and the management of its resources, control lies in the hands of men.

The position of women in the Khasi society becomes clear when we examine the role of the youngest daughter, who is the traditional heir to the ancestral property of the household. As the heir to the family property, the youngest daughter is not only expected to be closely guided by the counsel of the mother's brother who controls the property but is also obliged to look after her aged parents and other vulnerable members of the family. Hence the youngest daughter is expected to have high moral standards—standards set by the society which is directly or indirectly set by men, so much so that poor moral conduct or religious conversion could result in the loss of her rights. In contrast to the young daughter the elder daughter has more autonomy but due to the absence of ancestral property she is more dependent on her husband.

While matriliney serves to promote women's economic initiative, the ideology of gender, which views women primarily as agents of reproduction, does not augur well for their development. The Khasi society witnesses the women's primary role as producing the heirs necessary to maintain the continuity of the family, the lineage and the clan.

So while lineage and inheritance is reckoned through the female line in keeping with matrilineal principles, the society resembles a patrilineal one, in that major decision-making is vested in males - most importantly, the maternal uncles or the "Kni" who is a key figure and has the responsibility of being the spiritual and moral guide for his sister's children and he exercises control with regard to most of the important issues including those pertaining to economic interests and decisions. Despite men's restricted access to property ownership, their rights (as a gender) of control over that property, on the one hand, and their access to public bodies, on the other, has often enabled them to consolidate social prestige and political power. It is still men who have access to and control of law making bodies and local decision-making councils. This has meant that although rights in landed property conferred important benefits on women, their virtual

exclusion from property management and from jural and overall authority has circumscribed the power they could derive from those rights. Another Question arises here: Does Khasi women of the present society bears only responsibilities and exercises no rights?.

In this era of globalization, the original system has now a day's been largely distorted Changes has taken place in matrilineal system over the period of time among the Khasis of Meghalaya. This transition in the Khasi society is due to the changes in the overall set-up. This process of transformation of matrilineal society into different phases has been the outcome of factors like modernisation in terms of educational attainments, socio-economic characteristics and developmental factors that have somehow changed the perception and attitude of people among the Khasis and traditional system in many respects. It is hence imperative to take a close look at the status of the Khasi women in order to place things in proper sociological perspective. The basic aim of the study is thus to understand the changes that has taken place in it over the period of time among the Khasis of Meghalaya. .The khasi tribal society is passing through a stage of transition from tradition to modern which may serve to be favorable for the status of women.

Therefore it is pertinent to enquire about the direction to which the position and status of women are moving with the development of the society.

The present paper thus attempts to assess the dynamics of status and position of khasi women with the development of the society. It is examined through a number of social, economic, political, cultural, psychological and attitudinal indicators on the basis of the primary data on such factors collected randomly from a few villages and towns in East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY AND STUDY AREA:

In order to discuss the status of khasi women in the present society, it has been studied through primary survey method and presented in the form of percentage distribution.. . Primary data has been collected through direct questionnaire method and personal interview from different category of people living in the district. .

The villages and towns are chosen in random purposively on consideration of conveniences, such as access and communication, security, expenditure involved in survey etc. However most of the features of the khasi society of Meghalaya have much in common in the aforesaid selected villages and towns .Given the resources available, it was decided to cover 300 households all from (erstwhile) East Khasi Hills district. The choice of East Khasi Hills over West Khasi Hills was purely purposive. According to 2001 census, little over 42 per cent population of the East Khasi Hills district live in the urban areas. Thus, it was decided to cover 126 households (42 per cent of 300) from the urban areas and theremaining174 from the rural area. The ratio of male and female-headed families in the selected households was found to be 1.8 : 1 in Meghalaya. Though the society of Meghalaya is commonly known as matrilineal and contemporary socially patterns have the external appearance of a continuing matrilineal organisation, the internal structure has altered because of many changes occurring in the society

resulting in a number of deviations from Khasi matrilineal principles., more than two third of the families run by males and only around 1/3rd are headed by females.

The question naturally arises whether the society of Meghalaya gradually approaching towards a sort of bilateral arrangement, or patriarchal ideologies and patrilineal principles operate within the system or the dominance of female still has been prevailing in the same manner and the change has left room for no inequality among the genders.

Then, we have stratified the families and finally chosen 112 households; 45 out of 205 male-headed households and 67 from 95 female-headed households. Data have been collected, from the finally chosen households, on different aspects like family size, sex, education, occupation, marital status, etc and also on their attitude/opinion towards social, political, cultural economic aspects and psychological aspects of the heads as well as other members of the families. From that information we tried to understand the process of empowerment by analysing the data.

The study is mainly descriptive and exploratory.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Hence the above examination on the status of women in the khasi society of Meghalaya reveals that while the system of matriliney is being followed, patriarchal ideologies and matrilineal principles also operate within the system and ultimately define the roles and responsibilities of the khasi women that allow room for deprivation and inequality with the developmental changes of the society. Though Meghalaya is known as the matrilineal society, now many of the families are headed by the males. The tendency is increasing with the increasing involvement of male in the socio-economic activities, expansion of education, emergence of nuclear families etc. However in the family there is no discrimination among the male and female child. This is partly because of the economic independence of the females and their customary laws, which is still dominant in the Khasi society.

Women in the rural Khasi society are free from any limitation and can participate freely in any function of social and religious importance. Also they can move freely without the company of male or others and without the permission of male or other seniors. So there is very less insecurity problem unlike the other societies

However while women have comparative security under matriliney, they are not entirely free from subordination. 25.3 female heads agree that physical violence exists in female headed households as compared to 60% in male headed households in the changing societal set-up. This has been compounded by the fact that desertion and other forms of violations and violence against women are very much present in the state. The females have the right to select their own husbands which leads to higher status of dignity and position of women in the society. The implication is that even though the educated females acquire the ability to think better and earn the capability of economic independence, a major part of them do not want to remain in isolation of male counterpart because of future security.

Though earlier female used to dominate in the field of various economic activities now-a-days male also involved in different activities. Relatively more females

are illiterate than male. Yet the females limit the size of the family as they are more aware of the benefits of a small family. Data reveals that, now the high collar jobs are mostly occupied by the males and the income of the female-headed households are relatively less and associated with significant inter-family variation. On the whole, female are relatively in a lower level of occupation than their counterpart men in our study area.

Moreover, poverty cuts across the society where it is the womenfolk in particular who become vulnerable with little or no bargaining power to fight it. . Yet the female better manage the family and give more emphasis on the human development indicators like education, health etc As female manage family better, they would be able to further the welfare of the family members and thus the society.

Though traditionally the women (especially the youngest one) are supposed to inherit ancestral property, men also inherit property under different circumstances. However the system as a whole needs re-examination also with regard to property rights. The entire property should not go to the youngest daughter alone but should be equally shared with the rest of the siblings including sons.

Most of the khasi womenfolk do not believe in reservation in the local bodies or other constitutional areas that would help raising their status in the society. Of course, in Meghalaya all decision bodies are male dominated, where all major decisions are in the hands of men. Therefore, real improvement can only happen when the patriarchal mindset of these bodies is reversed. the females need to be pursued to take part in decision making democratically so that they can work in more organised way and empower themselves It is only the inclusion of women in decision making process which will enable a change in attitudes in a far more effective manner than any legislation and amendments The society will move forward if there is an equal partnership between men and women.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

In this era of globalization and modernization it is necessary to protect and nurture the status of women in these societies with the adoption of essential measures for the improvement of education, income of the females to fill the gap between male and female, reduction of poverty, preventing households from being single parentage or one side's desertion, re-examination with regard to property rights, termination of physical violence on womenfolk for the comprehensive development and progress of the whole society.

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