CHAPTER I

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I

Interest in the ethnography of the Khasis appears to be more than two centuries old as is evident from the writings of the British colonial administrators after the establishment of the Diwani of Bengal in 1765. Since then isolated articles kept on appearing in various research journals. The first full volume monograph, however, appeared in 1906 under the title "The Khasis" written by Major P.R.T. Gurdon¹ an officer of the Imperial Army who was Deputy Commissioner, Eastern Bengal and Assam and Superintendent of Ethnography in Assam. After Gurdon's work several works started appearing on the Khasi which followed by and large the tone and the style of Gurdon. Another major work appeared in English language in 1961 in the form of comparison between the Khasi and their not-to-distant neighbour the Garos. The work was based upon an intensive field work in Anthropological tradition by its author Chie Nakane² (a Japanese Scholar) during 1955-1956. In between these two major works and subsequently thereafter several writings appeared in English and in the Khasi vernacular. The theoretical position taken in almost all the works (cited in
the bibliography at the end of this dissertation) remains the same i.e., the descent theory of kinship.

The significance attached to this theory, in our opinion, was great perhaps because of the structural peculiarities of the society which are very different from the structural organisation of most of the societies in the world. Thus, features matrilineal organisation of the society were always highlighted besides the physionomic characteristics of the people who looked very different — physically as well as socially — from those who wrote about them.

II

The descent theory has been used to explain the Khasi kinship structure as well as the rules of inheritance. Consequently explanations have been provided with respect to the notion of matrikin unity of siblings in the mother's group, the authority of brothers as well as mother's brother on their natal group, the notion of matrilocal residence. Detailed accounts are presented in respect of the transfer of property from mother to the youngest daughter. Scholars have debated over the rights of the youngest daughter in relation to the ancestral property. This debate centred around the nomenclature of youngest daughter's position.
as that of an owner or that of a custodian. Kieth Cantlie, a British administrator, presented an outline of the Khasi customary laws and usages in his pioneering work "Notes on Khasi Law", published in 1934. This slim volume has assumed the status of the only authentic reference work in civil courts today. Cantlie has taken the position that the youngest daughter is the custodian and not the owner of ancestral property. But then the implication of this position are left as a matter of detailed interpretation by the jurists and the lawyers engaged in the settlement of legal disputes.

The Khasi society has been viewed as consisting of several clans and the kinship studies available in English language have given an impression as if the structure of society could be viewed in terms of clan as a unit. Unfortunately the treatment given to various anthropological terms, viz., clan, matriarchal, matrilineal, descent, etc. was highly unsufficient. Gurdon writes in his book on tribal organisation:

The Inhabitant of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills may be said to be divided into the following sections — Khasi, Synteng or Pnar, War, Bhoi, Lyngngam.... These divisions are sub-divided into a number of septs, taking Mr. Risleý's definition of 'Sept' as being the largest exogamous division of the tribe it will, however, be more convenient to speak of these septs as 'clan', the word 'clan' having been used in other parts of this monograph and by other writers.
In subsequent paragraphs as well we get more scatty descriptions of the Khasi kinship. As if said in one breath he states,

The descendants of one ancestors of the clan, ka Iawbei Tynrai, are called Shi-Kur or one clan. We then come to the division of the kphoh or sub-clan, all the descendants of one great grandmother (Ka Iawbei Tymmen), being styled Shi kphoh. The next division is the iing (Lit. House) or family.... The young grandmothers, her daughters and their children are said to belong to Shi iing, one house, the word iing in this instance possessing among the Khasis the same significance as the English word family.5

Thus we see how quickly and how inappositely several anthropological concepts have been used in the description. Let us not blame Gurdon for such a confused writing. He was neither a practising anthropologist nor sufficient advancements were made in anthropological understanding during his time. After all systematic comparative studies on various human societies started appearing only in the middle of the current century. Credit goes to Radcliffe Brown for compiling and editing a comparative treatise on several African matrilineal societies.6 The Anthropological rigour in describing the Khasi kinship structure was visible for the first time in the work of Chie Nakane, which appeared in the sixth decade of the present century.

Nakane started her analysis with the study of Khasi
kinship terminology and tried to build up the network of
kinship relations by enlarging the scope beyond the limits
of descent group. She refrained from finding English equiva-
lents of the vernacular kinship term and tried to understand
them in the context of their social usage. In the first
paragraph of her chapter on Khasi kinship structure she
wrote, "The Khasi kinship terminology does not show the
structural significance of the marriage roles except for
the basic distinction between own matrilineal kin, Kur,
and not matrilineal kin, Kha; this distinction serves to
enforce the exogamous rule." She then takes into account
the importance of the group of 'bridegroom-givers' in rela-
tion to the group of the bride. The former group enters
into the Kha relationship with the latter group with the
birth of the first child. This also makes the husband-father,
as we shall see subsequently in our own analysis, play an
important contributory role in the economy of the group
of the wife - mother.

She is quite realistic in her selection of the smal-
lest analytical unit for the society when she writes,

"The most important functional descent unit
is called iing. The iing is the lowest order
of clan segmentation, smaller than the kpoh -
a kpoh may include two or more iing.... The
Khasi consider this unit to be the most
important social indepth for classification
of individual. Marriages are arranged by
individual iing, not by wider group of kins-
men. The iing is the structurally significant
norm."
III

True to the empiricist tradition she based her analysis on the facts collected in the field and escaped such pitfalls of conjectures as well as unscientific explanations as were visible in the writings of the British administrators. It is unfortunate that her clarity does not seem to have been utilised by her successors in their writings. This may be perhaps due to the lack of field-based micro-level studies on the society as well as a concern with the micro-level generalisations on the Khasi community.

Literature published in the Khasi language describes extensively the organisation of the society and the set of norms laying down the prescription for interpersonal interaction in the society but then the purpose behind such writings is different from that of any anthropological work. Such writings are meant for the younger generation in the society and intend to inform them about the values to be cherished in order to establish a good order. On the one hand, the authors deal with the origin of the society while on the other hand, they exhort the people to emulate the traditions of high morality as practiced and laid down by the ancestors. In other words we could say that the purpose of such writings was largely to glorify the past and scorn at the present.
IV

In the current study which is purely descriptive and explanatory in nature we intend to understand the kinship structure of the Khasi society in general and inheritance of property in particular. The purpose of the dissertation restricts the scope of the treatment to micro-level small sized sample. We chose a village, Pdengshnong, in Cherra Subdivision of the East Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. Under the given time constrain we decided to adopt the techniques of social survey instead of depending wholly on participants observation in anthropological tradition of field work. We had chosen a sample of 40 households randomly out of total number of 206 households. Further, techniques of schedule and indepth interviews were utilised in order to collect empirical data. Data were collected on various demographic aspects, kinship relations in terms of the ing (the currently accepted spelling of the word spelled earlier as iing); kpop linkages of ing if the kpop existed in the village; kour affiliations of each ing; etc. In addition to these structural aspects of kinship, data were also collected on the inheritance of ancestral property, accumulation of ancestral property, generation of self acquired property, the role of and the attitudes towards the members of a matrilinage and the husband/father in the matters relating to
both types of property etc. The issues were also examined in relation to the customary laws codified by the British administrators as well as the Khasi social leaders.

V

Let us admit at the very outset that the motivation behind this work was not simply an intellectual curiosity just for the sake of knowledge but it was something more than that. At the back of our minds was a sense of helplessness in comprehending systematically the structure of society (which in our view is a prerequisite to the understanding of the process of transformation undergoing in the present day Khasi society) by going through the literatures based mainly on impressions (written by non-Khasis scholars) memory (written by various Khasi scholars with due regards to scholars in both categories).

On the basis of our wider reading on the subject and our general impressions gathered in everyday interaction. We were somehow not convinced that the society operates at the level of clans and thus we were not willing to accept clan either as the unit of kinship study or a property - holding corporate body. The Khasi scholars in the vernacular language had used the term kur which was erroneously translated into English as clan. We do not expect the social thinkers
in the society to be conversant with anthropological concepts and thus we do not blame them if they did not explain the contexts and different usages of the term kur in their language. After all, their target readership was their own people who knew very well the various contexts in which the single term kur was used. Responsibility for clarification lies with those who address themselves to a wider and mixed readership. Nakane did carry out that responsibility but for whatever reasons she failed to create a following. We decided to adopt the vernacular term in our writing without much care to give their exact English equivalence.

Emphasis on the principle of matrilineal descent practiced in the society seems to have overshadowed the importance of marriage as well as a father. Man has been described mainly as a brother to his sister and mother's brother to his sister's children. We were tempted to examine his affinal role as well. This role we wanted to examine particularly in the context of property in his wife's matrilineage. In the context of property we were concerned not only with the position of the youngest daughter but also with the position of the elder daughters.

One difficulty was encountered by us in regard to data collection and analysis. This was in identifying the basic unit of study in terms of the prevailing concepts
in sociological literature. We have referred earlier that we did not agree to the choice of the term clan in this regard. The choice of the vernacular term kur was also rejected as none of the usages suggested it as the unit at the operational level. Though this term is used extensively by the people in the context of property. The vernacular expression ing came closest though it had a dual meaning — indicating the house as well as the primary kins dwelling in that house. Ing could not be equated with the concept of family and its variants because the members living in a ing do not present a uniform model and consequently the same criticisms were applicable in this case also as they were applicable in the study of Kashmiri Pandits (Madan)\(^9\) or Radhavanaj people (Shah).\(^{10}\) Agreeing with Shah that, "... the household is one of the several dimensions of the family and should be viewed in relation to other dimension of family." We decided to view residential unit ing with its constituents members as a household.

In view of the above we organized the exercise of data collection through field work (spread over a period of three months during January-February and April 1990). The description and analytical treatment of the data are presented in the dissertation as follows:
Chapter II : Pdengshnong - The Village and the People.

Chapter III : Kinship and Marriage.

Chapter IV : Inheritance of Property.

Chapter V : Conclusion.
REFERENCES


5. Ibid.


8. Ibid., p. 119.
